Protecting Your Children From Disease – Are Vaccines Really Safe?

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As parents, it is often difficult to take your healthy child to the pediatrician's office and watch as a series of injections are administered. Most parents have faith in their child's physician and accept the policies on childhood immunizations. However, with more vaccines added to the immunization schedules in the past few years, there have been a growing number of parents who are questioning the safety of all these vaccines.

In the past, some researchers have theorized that certain vaccines, or combinations of vaccines can cause diabetes, or asthma, or Multiple Sclerosis, or SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Subsequent studies have shown that there is no link between any of these diseases and vaccines. The issue of vaccine safety became more controversial in 1998 when a medical journal in England published a study linking the MMR (Measles, Mumps, Rubella) vaccine to the development of autism in young children. Autism is a severe developmental disorder, usually identified and diagnosed when a child is between 18 and 30 months of age. The causes of autism are not fully understood but evidence indicates that that autism is a complex brain disorder, possibly genetic, that begins during pregnancy. The 1998 study was found to be unreliable but it was featured on a popular American TV news program that only served to alarm many parents and cause them to question the safety of the MMR vaccine.

Since then, extensive research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the National Institutes of Health, the Institute of Medicine, the World Health Organization, and the American Academy of Family Physicians, among others, has concluded that there is no scientific evidence to support the theory that the MMR vaccine or any other vaccine can cause or lead to the development of autism. This conclusion has been corroborated by the findings of the National Alliance for Autism Research, a leading autism advocacy organization, which believes that autism occurs before birth and that vaccines appear to have no relationship to the development of autism.

Immunization against diseases is one of the world's most effective tools for protecting public health. Vaccine safety is a priority of the health agencies of the U.S. Federal Government. To ensure the safety of vaccines, the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health and other agencies routinely monitor and conduct research to examine any reports of adverse side effects or possible vaccine safety issues. Although all vaccines have possible side effects for some people, when you compare the risk of vaccines and the risk of disease, vaccines are by far the safer choice.

In the U.S. and many other countries, childhood immunization programs have resulted in the elimination of diseases such as smallpox and polio. In addition, serious infectious diseases such as diphtheria, pertussis, and measles have become rare. Most parents today have never seen a child stricken with polio or tetanus. Magazines do not often feature immunization success stories, but they do report rare alleged vaccine horror stories. It is important to understand that before the current use of vaccines, many children died from these diseases or their complications. Chickenpox had caused the deaths of over 90 people and 9000 hospitalizations yearly. In developing countries, measles remains one of the leading causes of child mortality. Measles can lead to pneumonia, seizures, inflammation of the brain (encephalitis), permanent brain damage, and death. Mumps can result in deafness, brain and spinal cord infection (meningitis), and death. Rubella can be transmitted to pregnant women and cause a risk of birth defects in the unborn child. Although these diseases are rarely seen in the U.S. today, outbreaks can still occur if MMR and other immunization rates drop. It is important to have all children immunized so that these diseases can never reappear and affect unprotected children.
Talk to your child's physician about immunizations. If you have concerns about vaccine safety, it is important for your physician to know the following:

- Do you have cultural, religious, or personal beliefs that affect your views about immunizations?
- Has your child or any child you know ever had a reaction to an immunization?
- Do you have specific questions about the safety of certain vaccines?

Your physician will be able to discuss your concerns and provide you with information. For additional information about vaccine safety, childhood diseases, and autism, you may contact the following resources:

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 800-370-2943 [www.nichd.nih.gov](http://www.nichd.nih.gov)

National Immunization Program Information Hotline 800-232-2522 (English) 800-232-0233 (Spanish) [www.cdc.gov/nip](http://www.cdc.gov/nip) and ACIP (Advisory Committee for Immunization Practices): [www.cdc.gov/nip/publications/ACIP-list.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nip/publications/ACIP-list.htm)

National Alliance for Autism Research (NAAR) 888-777-NAAR [www.naar.org](http://www.naar.org)

For information about the current childhood immunization schedule, contact your child's physician. Information is also available on the American Academy of Pediatrics website: [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

**Ten Important Facts About Immunizations:**

- Immunizations are one of the best ways to protect children against serious infectious diseases.
- Vaccines are very safe, thanks to advances in medical research and ongoing review by physicians, scientists, and public health officials.
- Children and adults who have not been immunized are at risk for serious harm by infectious diseases.
- Infants and young children are extremely vulnerable to infectious diseases.
- Although there may be small risks associated with immunizations, children and adults are far more likely to be harmed by the disease rather than the vaccination.
- The reason children receive many more immunizations than in the past is because we can safely protect them from more diseases than ever before.
- People who are not immunized increase the chances of spreading disease to others. Infectious diseases spread quickly among non-immunized populations.
- Immunizations work by helping your own body's immune system become stronger.
- There are no effective alternatives for protection against serious infectious diseases.

*Without immunizations, the diseases we are currently protected from will return, causing much sickness, disability, and death.*

This information is provided for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for sound medical judgment. If you have any questions or concerns, you should discuss them with your physician.