

Q. How can parents sort out conflicting information about vaccines?

A. Decisions about vaccine safety must be based on well-controlled scientific studies.

Parents are often confronted with “scientific” information found on television, on the Internet, in magazines and in books that conflicts with information provided by healthcare professionals. But few parents have the background in microbiology, immunology, epidemiology and statistics to separate good scientific studies from poor studies. Parents and physicians benefit from the expert guidance of specialists with experience and training in these disciplines.

Committees of these experts are composed of scientists, clinicians and other caregivers who are as passionately devoted to our children’s health as they are to their own children’s health. They serve the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/vaccines), the American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org) and the Infectious Diseases Society of America (www.nni.org), among other groups. These organizations provide excellent information to parents and healthcare professionals through their Web sites. Their task is to determine whether scientific studies are carefully performed, published in reputable journals and, most importantly, reproducible. Information that fails to meet these standards is viewed as unreliable.

When it comes to issues of vaccine safety, these groups have served us well. They were the first to figure out that intestinal blockage was a rare consequence of the first rotavirus vaccine, and the vaccine was quickly discontinued. And they recommended a change from the oral polio vaccine, which was a rare cause of paralysis, to the polio shot when it was clear that the risks of the oral polio vaccine outweighed its benefits.

These groups have also investigated possible relationships between vaccines and asthma, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, AIDS and autism. No studies have reliably established a causal link between vaccines and these diseases — if they did, the questioned vaccines would be withdrawn from use.

Q. Are vaccines still necessary?

A. Although several of the diseases that vaccines prevent have been dramatically reduced or eliminated, vaccines are still necessary:

- to prevent common infections

Some diseases are so common in this country that a choice not to get a vaccine is a choice to get infected. For example, choosing not to get the pertussis (whooping cough) vaccine is a choice to risk a serious and occasionally fatal infection.

- to prevent infections that could easily re-emerge

Some diseases in this country continue to occur at very low levels (for example, measles, mumps and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, or Hib). If immunization rates in our schools or communities are low, outbreaks of these diseases are likely to occur. This is exactly what happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s when thousands of children were hospitalized with measles and more than 120 died. Children were much more likely to catch measles if they weren’t vaccinated. Recent measles outbreaks in Europe also provide evidence of how quickly a disease can re-emerge.

- to prevent infections that are common in other parts of the world

Although some diseases have been completely eliminated (polio) or virtually eliminated (diphtheria) from this country, they still occur commonly in other parts of the world. Children are paralyzed by polio in India and sickened by diphtheria in India and other countries in the southeastern region of Asia. Because there is a high rate of international travel, outbreaks of these diseases are only a plane ride away.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Epidemiology and Prevention of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases*. 12th Edition. Atkinson W, Wolfe S, Hamborsky J, eds. Washington, DC: Public Health Foundation; 2011.

Q. Do vaccines contain additives?

A. Many vaccines contain trace quantities of antibiotics or stabilizers.

Antibiotics are used during the manufacture of vaccines to prevent inadvertent contamination with bacteria or fungi. Trace quantities of antibiotics are present in some vaccines. However, the antibiotics contained in vaccines (neomycin, streptomycin or polymyxin B) are not those commonly given to children. Therefore, children with allergies to antibiotics such as penicillin, amoxicillin, sulfa, or cephalosporins can still get vaccines.

Gelatin is used to stabilize live viral vaccines and is also contained in many food products. People with known allergies to gelatin contained in foods may have severe allergic reactions to the gelatin contained in vaccines. However, this reaction is extremely rare.

Offit PA, Jew RK. Addressing parents’ concerns: Do vaccines contain harmful preservatives, adjuvants, additives, or residuals? *Pediatrics* 2003;112:1394-1401.

American Academy of Pediatrics. In Pickering LK, ed. *Red Book: 2012 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 29th Edition. Elk Grove Village, IL.

Q. Are vaccines safe?

A. Because vaccines are given to people who are not sick, they are held to the highest standards of safety. As a result, they are among the safest things we put into our bodies.

How does one define the word safe? If safe is defined as “free from any negative effects,” then vaccines aren’t 100 percent safe. All vaccines have possible side effects. Most side effects are mild, such as fever, or tenderness and swelling where the shot is given. But some side effects from vaccines can be severe. For example, the pertussis vaccine is a very rare cause of persistent inconsolable crying, high fever or seizures with fever. Although these reactions do not cause permanent harm to the child, they can be quite frightening.

If vaccines cause side effects, wouldn’t it be “safer” to just avoid them? Unfortunately, choosing to avoid vaccines is not a risk-free choice — it is a choice to take a different and much more serious risk. Discontinuing the pertussis vaccine in countries like Japan and England led to a tenfold increase in hospitalizations and deaths from pertussis. Recently, a decline in the number of children receiving measles vaccine in the United Kingdom and the United States led to an increase in measles hospitalizations.

When you consider the risk of vaccines and the risk of diseases, vaccines are the safer choice.

Plotkin S, et al. *Vaccines*. 6th Edition. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders and Co., 2012.

Q. Do children get too many shots?

A. Newborns commonly manage many challenges to their immune systems at the same time.

Because some children could receive as many as 25 shots by the time they are 2 years old and as many as five shots in a single visit to the doctor, many parents wonder whether it is safe to give children so many vaccines.

Although the mother’s womb is free from bacteria and viruses, newborns immediately face a host of different challenges to their immune systems. From the moment of birth, thousands of different bacteria start to live on the surface of the skin and intestines. By quickly making immune responses to these bacteria, babies keep them from invading the bloodstream and causing serious diseases.

In fact, babies are capable of responding to millions of different viruses and bacteria because they have billions of immunologic cells circulating in the bodies. Therefore, vaccines given in the first two years of life are a raindrop in the ocean of what an infant’s immune system successfully encounters and manages every day.

Offit PA, et al. Addressing parents’ concerns: Do vaccines weaken or overwhelm the infant’s immune system? *Pediatrics*. 2002;109:124-129.

Q. Is the amount of aluminum in vaccines safe?

A. Yes. All of us have aluminum in our bodies and most of us are able to process it effectively. The two main groups of people who cannot process aluminum effectively are severely premature infants who receive large quantities of aluminum in intravenous fluids and people who have long-term kidney failure and receive large quantities of aluminum, primarily in antacids. In both cases the kidneys are not working properly or at all and the people are exposed to large quantities of aluminum over a long period of time.

The amount of aluminum in vaccines given during the first six months of life is about 4 milligrams, or four-thousandths of a gram. A gram is about one-fifth of a teaspoon of water. In comparison, breast milk ingested during this period will contain about 10 milligrams of aluminum and infant formulas will contain about 40 milligrams. Soy-based formulas contain about 120 milligrams of aluminum.

When studies were performed to look at the amount of aluminum injected in vaccines, the levels of aluminum in blood did not detectably change. This indicates that the quantity of aluminum in vaccines is minimal as compared with the quantities already found in the blood.

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Q. Do vaccines cause autism?

A. Carefully performed studies clearly disprove the notion that vaccines cause autism.

Because the signs of autism may appear in the second year of life, at around the same time children receive certain vaccines, and because the cause of autism is unknown, some parents wondered whether vaccines might be at fault. These concerns focused on three hypotheses — autism was caused by the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine, thimerosal, an ethylmercury-containing preservative used in vaccines, or receipt of too many vaccines too soon.

A large body of medical and scientific evidence now strongly refutes these notions. Multiple studies have found that vaccines do not cause autism. These studies included hundreds of thousands of children, occurred in multiple countries, were conducted by multiple investigators and were well controlled.

Andrews N, et al. Thimerosal exposure in infants and developmental disorders: a retrospective cohort study in the United Kingdom does not show a casual association, *Pediatrics*. 2004;114:584-591.

Dales L, et al. Time trends in autism and in MMR immunization coverage in California. *JAMA*. 2001;285:1183-1185.

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This information is provided by the Vaccine Education Center at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The Center is an educational resource for parents and healthcare professionals and is composed of scientists, physicians, mothers and fathers who are devoted to the study and prevention of infectious diseases. The Vaccine Education Center is funded by endowed chairs from The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The Center does not receive support from pharmaceutical companies.

Q. Does my child need to still get vaccines if I am breastfeeding?

A. Yes. The types of immunity conferred by breastfeeding and immunization are different. Specifically, the antibodies that develop after immunization are made by the baby's own immune system and, therefore, will remain in the form of immunologic memory; this is known as active immunity. In contrast, antibodies in breast milk were made by the maternal immune system, so they will provide short-term protection, but will not last more than a few weeks. These antibodies are usually not as diverse either, so the baby may be protected against some infections but remain susceptible to others. Immunity generated from breast milk is called passive immunity. Passive immunity was practiced historically when patients exposed to diphtheria were given antitoxin produced in horses; antitoxins to snake venoms are also an example of passive immunity.

Q. How can a "one-size-fits-all" approach to vaccines be OK for all children?

A. The recommended immunization schedule is not the same for all children.

In fact, recommendations for individual vaccines often vary based upon individual differences in current and long-term health status, allergies and age. Each vaccine recommendation, often characterized by a single line on the immunization schedule, is supported by about 25 to 40 additional pages of specific instructions for healthcare providers who administer vaccines. In addition, an approximately 60-page document titled "General Recommendations on Immunization" serves as the basis for all vaccine administration. The recommendations are updated as needed by the CDC and a comprehensive update is published every few years.

Q. What is the harm of separating, spacing out or withholding some vaccines?

A. Although the vaccine schedule can look intimidating, it is based upon the best scientific information available and is better tested for safety than any alternative schedules.

Experts review studies designed to determine whether the changes are safe in the context of the existing schedule. These are called concomitant-use studies.

Separating, spacing out or withholding vaccines causes concern because infants will be susceptible to diseases for longer periods of time. When a child should receive a vaccine is determined by balancing when the recipient is at highest risk of contracting the disease and when the vaccine will generate the best immune response.

Finally, changing the vaccine schedule requires additional doctor's visits. Research measuring cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, has determined that children do not experience more stress when receiving two shots as compared with one shot. Therefore, an increased number of visits for individual shots will mean an increase in the number of stressful situations for the child without benefit. In addition, there is an increased potential for administration errors, more time and travel needed for appointments, potentially increased costs and the possibility that the child will never get some vaccines

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