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Vaccines 101: Trusted Pediatricians Share Their Vaccination Tips



VACCINES 101: TRUSTED PEDIATRICIANS SHARE THEIR VACCINATION TIPS

April 28, 2014

A note from the Healthy Child Healthy World Staff:

*Vaccines are on your mind. You're telling us so via e-mail, on Facebook, and more. You have fears and the research you're doing online isn't helping. You asked, so we're answering. We reached out to a few of our trusted advisors and asked for their best, most recent, most rooted in science vaccination advice. And we're launching a series of posts with their answers starting with this wealth of wisdom from pediatrician Dr. Bob Sears, author of *The Vaccine Book: Making an Educated Decision for Your Children* (Little, Brown; 2011). We applaud your desire to self educate about vaccination and believe all parents should take the time to do some research about the risks of both vaccines as well as disease. Keep an eye out for more posts in this series in upcoming months from*

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VACCINES: WHERE SHOULD PARENTS START TO TACKLE THIS TOUGH DECISION?



By Dr. Bob Sears, MD, FAAP, American Pediatrician

New parents are presented with many healthcare choices for their baby, and the decision whether or not to vaccinate is the most confusing and controversial of all. Wise parents devote countless hours of research prior to baby's birth so they can be prepared,

because vaccines are presented to every newborn on day one of life in the form of the **hepatitis B vaccine**. Most parents who take the time to read about the pros and cons of this particular vaccine come to the obvious conclusion that it is completely unnecessary for about 99% of American children. As hepatitis B is a sexually transmitted infection, it is primarily a disease of those who are sexually active with multiple partners; it can also be passed by sharing IV drug needles. Neither of these conditions apply to newborn babies, therefore it is an unnecessary vaccine at this young age. The only babies to whom it does apply are those born to a hepatitis-B positive mother or those being raised in a household with a hepatitis-B positive person. These babies are at risk of exposure at birth and accidental blood exposures from the family over the years and should be vaccinated. But most parents don't take the time to understand these facts before baby is born, so when the Doctor or Nurse tells them it's time for baby's first vaccine to protect him from life's dangers, why would parents even question it? A medical professional is only going to give baby a treatment that is important and useful, right?

Next comes baby's two-month checkup, and parents suddenly realize that their baby is going to be given six vaccines.

This expands to twenty-eight total vaccines by the second birthday, and about fifty-four total doses through all of childhood. Wise parents will take the time to do their research prior to the two-month appointment so they can be prepared with some questions for the doctor. Yet, it isn't easy for parents to understand all the pros and cons of vaccines. Some will spend weeks or months mulling over this decision and still be unsure. All parents want to protect their baby. No one wants his or her baby to catch a severe illness. Vaccines offer protection against some very serious diseases. But vaccines can have some very serious, even life-threatening, side effects. And vaccines aren't 100% effective. How do parents balance all these factors into a decision that they are comfortable with? Is it safer to vaccinate, or it is safer to brave the diseases? Where do parents even start?

Some will simply trust the health care system and their doctor's advice and go ahead with all vaccines according to the recommended schedule. Yet many parents today want more answers before they proceed. I meet with many such new parents in my office, and here is a summary of some of the main points I discuss with them:

1. Understand the risks of vaccines. As with all medical treatments, informed consent is an ethical right for all people. But don't expect to receive this informed consent verbally from your doctor because there isn't enough time in an entire day to hear all the risks. Most doctors provide vaccine information sheets you can read that give a brief

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overview of the risks. Parents should take the time to read these at a bare minimum. You can also read more about the risks in various books about vaccines.

2. Understand the risks of the diseases if you don't vaccinate. A thorough instruction on each disease is imperative to making an informed decision. Don't expect your doctor to have time to communicate this information to you. A brief overview is provided in the above-mentioned vaccine information sheets, and you can read more online or in vaccine information books.

Here's a brief summary:

Overall, some of the diseases we vaccinate against pose little or no risk to American babies today (although there has been risk in the past): Diphtheria, tetanus, hepatitis B, polio, and rubella are examples.

Some diseases do occasionally occur, and can be serious, but are fortunately uncommon enough that they only pose a small risk: Hib meningitis, pneumococcal meningitis, measles, and mumps.

Some diseases are still common and occur with enough frequency that parents should be aware that their children may catch them: whooping cough (pertussis), flu, chicken pox, hepatitis A, and rotavirus. Fortunately, 99% of these cases are manageable and pass without complications. Severe cases are very rare. One exception is whooping cough during the first three months of life; this disease can be serious for very young babies, with a fatality rate of about 1 in 200. For older infants and children it's only a nuisance cough that can last for a month or two.

Two diseases apply to teenagers:

- HPV (genital warts/cervical cancer) is preventable, but the vaccine can be considered for those who choose high-risk behaviors.
- Meningococcal meningitis affects about 250 teens and young adults in the U.S. each year, and it is extremely severe, with a 20% fatality rate. Vaccination should be considered for teens.

Is the decision to not vaccinate a dangerous one?

No it is not. There is certainly some disease risk, which primarily involves whooping cough during the early months and a very small risk of infant meningitis. For the rest of the diseases, the severe ones are extremely rare, and the common ones are manageable in virtually all cases. No disease is both common and severe. Therefore, those who choose not to vaccinate are certainly not making a dangerous choice. The risk for each individual who makes such a choice is very small.

What about the public health? Do unvaccinated families put others at risk?

Well, yes. Those who don't vaccinate like to feel as if they are not endangering anybody else by this decision, but my opinion is that this is a valid concern. Those who are not vaccinated are more likely to catch a vaccine-preventable disease, and pass that disease to others. There are a few interesting tidbits that non-vaccinators use to try to defend their point of view: 1. More cases of disease occur in vaccinated people than in unvaccinated people; 2. People who are vaccinated shouldn't worry about those who are unvaccinated because the vaccinated ones are protected.

My response to these arguments is that vaccines are not 100% protective. So when a disease goes around, some vaccinated people will catch it. Since most people are vaccinated, statistically it is feasible that more cases will occur in vaccinated people whose vaccine didn't work compared to the number of cases in unvaccinated people. That doesn't mean the vaccine is useless, because if no one was vaccinated, everybody would likely catch the disease. Put it another way: put 100 people in a room, 90 vaccinated and 10 not. Pump in whooping cough. 9 out of 10 unvaccinated people will catch it. About 20% of vaccinated people will catch it (about 18 people). Vaccine critics will say, ah ha! See? More vaccinated people caught it than unvaccinated. However, put 100 unvaccinated people in a room, pump in whooping cough, and 90 of them will catch it.

My impression is that vaccines do work; they do reduce the risk of catching a disease and they do reduce the spread of disease. The more people we have who are unvaccinated, the more disease we are likely to see. Those who are vaccinated are mostly protected, but not completely.

Then everyone should be forced to vaccinate right, since it's in the public's best interest?

No. If vaccines were 100% harmless to everyone who received them, then we could insist and have mandatory vaccinations. But since vaccines do have some risk, parents should have the right to decline them for their children. Those who have concerns about vaccine chemicals and overall safety of vaccines have some valid viewpoints; more safety research is needed to insure that the chemicals and immune-modulating effects of vaccines on the immature immune and nervous systems of our infants aren't causing some small degree of harm to every infant who receives them. Most infants seem to handle vaccines just fine, but we don't know exactly what vaccines do to the immune and nervous system because we lack the technology to completely understand them. Not all parents are comfortable with this, and such parents should have the right to decline them. If too many parents make sure a decision, we will likely see an increase in some diseases.

Are some diseases are now increasing because of unvaccinated people? No. In fact, there has been no sustained increase in vaccine-preventable diseases. Measles goes up a tiny bit, then down again. Whooping cough goes up every 5 years or so, then goes down again. Nothing is on a continuous rise. Right now, there are enough vaccinating families that I don't foresee any significant or sustained increase in the near future.

But these diseases must be eliminated. Everyone must vaccinate, right?

The viewpoint of our public health department and mainstream medical institutions is that dangerous diseases should be prevented and eliminated at all costs. That's the priority. The danger of unrestricted disease is much greater than any vaccine side effects or unknown low level of harm that may or may not occur from vaccines. This is why most doctors and public health officials are so adamant about vaccinating. I agree that disease prevention and minimization is important, but I acknowledge that there is some risk with vaccines as well. We don't yet know everything we need to know about the negative effects of vaccines.

Is there a safer way to vaccinate? Most parents do choose to vaccinate, and most babies seem to handle them well.

IN MY PRACTICE I PREFER TO TAKE IT SLOW, SPREAD OUT VACCINES, AND FOCUS ON THE MORE IMPORTANT ONES FIRST. IF A DISEASE POSES NO RISK TO AN INFANT OR CHILD, I MAY NOT VACCINATE AGAINST IT. I HAVE A LONG DISCUSSION WITH EACH FAMILY IN MY PRACTICE, AND WE APPROACH VACCINES TOGETHER BASED ON EACH FAMILY'S GOALS AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS.

I ask all my patients to read and fully understand both sides of this issue before we proceed. Some choose to carefully vaccinate, and some choose not to do vaccines. Some delay them and start them later. Parents should read and understand vaccines and the diseases before they see their doctor, then schedule a dedicated appointment outside of a regularly scheduled checkup to have a long and detailed discussion about vaccines. If you feel that your doctor is not open to discuss options with you, find another.

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COMMENTS

**Judy Hall** · Essex District High School

Having raised a child and choosing not to vaccinate, I can report that we are doing fine. She has chosen to vaccinate for some things as an adult which is a good decision if one decides to travel. Everyone needs to remember that vaccinated individuals as well as un-vaccinated individuals can carry illness at anytime, airborne, mucousborne etc, knows no bounds of choosing a carrier. Immunization helps our system to protect us, the individual who has been vaccinated from the disease, not those around us. The best protection around choice is to maintain healthy lifestyle practices, a balanced diet, balance of activity and rest and lots of ways to destress or knowledge of ones stressors. Being healthy before receiving a vaccine is important too and if a child has been ill, even with a slight fever in the week before a vaccination appointment, I would delay the appointment because the immune system of the body is already busy working and should only have the added stress of a vaccine added during a well time. Our bodies do amazing things all the time and fighting infection is one the the greatest.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [11](#) · [Follow Post](#) · April 29 at 4:05pm**Amelia Winslow** · Top Commenter · Los Angeles, California

I'm pregnant and recently encountered a family whose kids have whooping cough since they decided not to vaccinate. It really irritated me that if I were just a few weeks further along they could have infected my newborn and I wouldn't have even known until after the fact (they did not disclose the condition). If a parent decides not to vaccinate or vaccinate slowly, I would hope they take very conservative precautions to protect other families if their children or they fall ill.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [8](#) · [Follow Post](#) · April 28 at 5:21pm**Jennifer Brown Shih** · Redondo Beach, California

FYI: new FDA study shows that even those who are vaccinated against whooping cough and show no signs can still acquire and pass on the bacteria that causes the disease. In fact, the bacteria gets passed around all the time. It's up to each persons immune system as to whether the body turns it into a toxoid which in turn causes what is known as whooping cough. There is also the argument that people with whooping cough vaccines are silent carriers which poses a greater risk. At least if someone has symptoms of the disease then they know to stay away. Just food for thought...

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [80](#) · April 29 at 12:28am**Kim Wildner** · Ankeny, Iowa

This works both ways.
20 years ago, someone brought their child to my home after live vaccination for polio. Live polio virus is shed for up to six weeks in a newly vaccinated child. Yet no one told parents to keep their kids away from immune compromised persons, the elderly or the unvaccinated. At that time, the ONLY cases of polio in 35 years had been caused either by the live vaccine or by someone spreading it due to being vaccinated by the live vaccine.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [27](#) · April 30 at 10:16am**Amelia Winslow** · Top Commenter · Los Angeles, California

Jennifer Brown Shih In this particular case the kids were not vaccinated, and were instructed by their parents not to tell anyone they had whooping cough, so clearly not an ideal example. But thanks for the additional info.

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