FAQ: Things You Should Know about Immunizations

THE BASICS

1. **Why should you be immunized?**
   By getting vaccinated, you protect yourself and avoid spreading disease to others who cannot be vaccinated. Immunizations have protected millions of people from potentially deadly diseases and saved thousands of lives. Most diseases that can be prevented by vaccines still exist in the world, even in the United States, although they occur rarely.

   Vaccines work by preparing your body to fight illness. Each immunization contains either a dead or a weakened germ (or parts of it) that causes a particular disease. Your body fights the disease by making antibodies that recognize specific parts of that germ. If you are ever exposed to the actual disease, antibodies are already in place and your body knows how to fight it so that you don't get sick. This is called immunity.

2. **How do vaccines protect communities?**
   By getting vaccinated, you protect others through “community immunity” or “herd immunity.” Community immunity protects individuals and helps prevent disease outbreaks. When enough people in the community are immunized, others are protected from infection because there’s little opportunity for the disease to spread. Newborns, pregnant women or people whose immune systems are weakened may not be able to receive certain vaccines. Yet even they will get some protection if the spread of a contagious disease is contained.

   Between 80% and 94% of people in your community, depending on the disease, need to be vaccinated to protect people at higher risk. This is why it's important to keep immunization rates high.

3. **What diseases do immunizations prevent?**
   Immunizations are recommended throughout your lifetime to protect against diseases such as influenza (flu), pneumococcal disease, hepatitis A and B, measles, and pertussis (whooping cough). Visit www.immunize.org/handouts/vaccine-questions.asp to learn about these and many other diseases that immunizations can prevent.

4. **Are the diseases that vaccines prevent serious?**
   Most people fully recover from vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs), but these diseases can be serious. VPDs are often most serious for young children, older adults, and people with chronic illnesses. However, even healthy children, teens, and adults can become seriously ill or die.

   - Infants with pertussis, a respiratory disease that causes severe coughing fits, can become very ill and die without warning. Teens and adults typically have milder symptoms but can still miss weeks of work/school, break ribs from intense coughing, and develop pneumonia and other complications.

   - Every year, hundreds of people in LA County are hospitalized because of flu. During the 2011-2012 flu season, 21 people died of flu complications.

   Pertussis and the flu are just two examples of VPDs that can be serious. Learn about others at www.shotbyshot.org and www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/parents-guide/default.htm.
5. Are vaccine-preventable diseases still around?
Yes. Because vaccines are so effective, there have been major drops in the number of cases of vaccine-preventable diseases, but these diseases are still around. For instance, in 2010 and 2011 in Los Angeles County:
- Nearly 1,500 people had pertussis (whooping cough) and four infants died from this disease.
- 35 people were hospitalized because of chickenpox and one person died.

Also, travelers who are not up to date with recommended vaccines can expose you to diseases that are not common in the United States. For instance, in San Diego in 2008, a measles outbreak that infected twelve children was started by an unvaccinated child who was infected with measles while traveling in Europe. If we stop vaccinating, a few cases of diseases like measles could easily turn into thousands.
Visit [www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4017.pdf](http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4017.pdf) to learn what might happen if we stopped vaccinating.

6. Is it better to get immunity by getting the disease?
No. Whereas immunity from disease often follows a single natural infection, immunity from vaccines usually occurs after several doses. However, the difference between vaccination and natural infection is the price paid for immunity. The price paid for immunity after natural infection might be:
- pneumonia from chickenpox or pneumococcus
- mental retardation from *Haemophilus influenzae* type B (Hib)
- birth defects from rubella
- liver cancer from hepatitis B virus or
- death from measles.

Vaccines let you build immunity without becoming ill, which is why it is always better to be protected by getting vaccinated.

IMMUNIZATION RECOMMENDATIONS AND TIMING

7. Do children, adolescents, and adults all need vaccines?
Vaccine recommendations are based on studies that show the times when people are at highest risk for different diseases and at what ages vaccines work best.

While childhood immunization rates are high, most adults don’t even realize they need to get vaccinated. Many assume that the vaccines they received as children will protect them for the rest of their lives. Generally this is true, except that:
- Some adults were never vaccinated as children.
- Newer vaccines were not available when some adults were children.
- Immunity can fade over time.
- As they age, adults become more likely to get serious diseases caused by common infections (such as flu and pneumococcus).

There are many tools determine if you or your family members have received all recommended vaccines. Visit [www.ph.lacounty.gov/ip/syndication/vaccineSchedule.htm](http://www.ph.lacounty.gov/ip/syndication/vaccineSchedule.htm) to view easy-to-read immunization schedules for all age groups. Remember, vaccinations are NOT just for kids! Regardless of age, we ALL need vaccines to keep us healthy.
8. **When do you need vaccines?**

The timing and spacing of vaccine doses are two of the most important issues that impact how well vaccines work. The immunization schedule, developed by doctors and other experts, gives the most complete and safest protection possible.

Vaccines are recommended starting at birth because infants’ immune systems are not yet fully mature, which makes it easier for bacteria and viruses to grow. This leaves them the most vulnerable to the devastating effects of serious vaccine-preventable diseases.

Your doctor or nurse will tell you when immunizations are needed. You can also see the vaccines that you may need at [www.ph.lacounty.gov/ip/syndication/vaccineSchedule.htm](http://www.ph.lacounty.gov/ip/syndication/vaccineSchedule.htm). Remember, each vaccine dose is important and you need several doses of most vaccines to be completely protected.

9. **Is it OK to spread out my child’s vaccines?**

No. You should not delay any vaccines, unless your child’s doctor recommends waiting for a medical reason. The longer that you delay, the longer your child is at risk for vaccine-preventable diseases. Children who are vaccinated on-time are protected when they are most likely to be exposed to and have complications from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Getting more than one vaccine at a time is safe and does not overburden your child’s immune system. So, spreading out shots means more trips to the doctor without any real benefit to your child.

Learn why the CDC’s immunization schedule is the best and safest choice at:
- [www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/parent-questions.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/parent-questions.html)

10. **Why can’t I wait until school to have my child immunized?**

Children under five years of age are especially susceptible to disease because their immune systems have not built up the necessary defenses to fight infection. By immunizing on time (by two years of age), you can protect your child and others at school or child care from disease.

California law requires that children receive a series of immunizations before entering public or private school, child care centers, or family child care homes. Your child needs clear documentation of these required vaccines, so be sure to keep your child’s immunization record in a safe place. To learn more about immunization requirements for schools and child care centers visit [www.shotsforschool.org](http://www.shotsforschool.org).

11. **What if my child didn't start his or her shots on time or got behind schedule? Will they still work?**

If your child did not begin immunizations at birth, or had only some shots, he or she can catch up. It is never too late to start getting immunizations and your child does not have to start over. The doses already given are effective, so your child can continue the schedule where he or she left off.

If your child has fallen behind, work with the doctor or clinic to get caught up. They will tell you when to bring the child in for vaccines and which vaccines are needed.

12. **What if my child has a cold, a fever, or is taking antibiotics? Can he or she still get vaccinated?**

In most cases, if your child has a mild illness such as a low fever, cold, or ear ache, he or she can still receive recommended immunizations, even while taking antibiotics.

If your child has a high fever, moderate illness, or severe illness, the doctor will decide whether to give vaccines or delay them until your child is better. If the doctor delayed vaccines due to an illness, be sure to follow-up to get your child up to date as soon as he or she is no longer sick.
13. Why is the immunization record (yellow card) important?

Keeping a record of your child’s immunizations is important so that you and the doctor will know what vaccines are due or overdue. The California Immunization Record (CIR) or “yellow card” is also used to determine if children entering school have met school immunization requirements. Adult immunization records also help you determine what shots are needed for travel, employment or advanced training.

VACCINE SAFETY

14. Are vaccines safe? Do they cause side effects or severe reactions?

Yes, vaccines are very safe. They are licensed only after thorough studies and safety monitoring. But like any medicine, they can occasionally cause side effects or reactions. The important thing to remember is that you are in much more danger from the disease than from the vaccines.

Most reactions are minor, local reactions (e.g. redness, pain where the shot was given). These are normal reactions that show that your body is responding to the vaccine. Systemic reactions, such as fever may also occur, but are less frequent.

Serious reactions are very rare. If you or your family member experiences a serious reaction after getting vaccinated, contact your doctor to report your symptoms.

To learn more about vaccine safety, visit www.ph.lacounty.gov/ip/providers/VaccineSafety.htm

15. Do vaccines cause autism?

Numerous studies have found no link between vaccines and autism. Some parents were especially concerned that the MMR vaccine might cause autism, but there’s no evidence linking the vaccine to autism. In fact, the average age of diagnosis of autism has been found to be the same in children who have and who have not received the MMR vaccine.

Researchers are discovering that subtle symptoms of autism are present early on, but often go unnoticed until the symptoms are more obvious- often around the time when children get their vaccines. This doesn’t mean that vaccines caused the autism.

So what could explain increased rates of autism in recent years? There’s a broader definition of autism that can be applied to more kids who have different degrees of symptoms. A greater awareness of the condition among health professionals has also led to more diagnoses. Finally, research into genetics and environmental factors might help identify possible causes. What appears clear is that vaccines are not the cause.

16. Why are there so many vaccines?

There are more vaccines available in the past, which is a good thing! Each new vaccine protects us from more diseases. In 1995, the vaccines given from birth through the teen years prevented nine different diseases. Today, they prevent 16 diseases, including:

- meningococcal disease, which takes the lives of 10-15% of the people who are infected
- human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes cervical and other cancers and
- chickenpox, which caused over 10,000 hospitalizations every year in the U.S. before we had a vaccine.
17. Can my child get more than one vaccine at the same visit?

Yes. Getting all recommended vaccines at the time of a visit increases the chance that your child will be vaccinated fully by the appropriate age. There is no evidence that getting more than one vaccine at the same time is harmful.

Combination vaccinations are an excellent way to reduce the number of shots during a visit. There are several licensed in the U.S., which are commonly used for young children.

TRAVEL VACCINES

18. What vaccines do I need before I travel?

Diseases that are rare or nonexistent in the United States, like measles and polio, still exist in other parts of the world. Doctors continue to vaccinate against these diseases because it’s easy to come into contact with them through travel, whether in the United States or international.

Which vaccinations you need depends on your destination, whether you will be spending time in rural areas, the season during which you are traveling, age, health status, previous immunizations, and other factors.

19. How can I get travel vaccines?

If you plan to travel, schedule a visit to your doctor or clinic 4-6 weeks before your trip. Most vaccines take time to become effective and some must be given over a period of days or weeks. If your trip is less than four weeks away, you should still see your doctor. You might still benefit from immunizations, medications and other information about how to protect yourself while traveling.

If your doctor’s office or clinic does not offer all of the vaccines you need for travel, visit www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/ip/Travel/lZ.htm for links to travel vaccination providers.

RESOURCES

20. Where can my family get vaccinated?

If you have health insurance, contact your regular doctor’s office or clinic to arrange for immunizations. If you do not have a regular provider or health insurance covering immunizations, consider the following resources:

- Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program: Children 18 years of age or younger, who are eligible for MediCal, are American Indian/Alaskan Native, are uninsured, or are underinsured, can receive immunizations at no-cost or a reduced-cost through the VFC Program. To learn more, visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/vfc/providers/eligibility.html.

- Patient Assistance Programs: Some uninsured adults can receive certain vaccines at no charge, if their doctor’s office or clinic participates in a vaccine patient assistance program.

- Pharmacies: Contact your local pharmacy to confirm which vaccines are offered, the age ranges that they vaccinate, the cost of vaccination, and whether they can bill your insurance.

- Community Health and Public Health Centers: Uninsured individuals may be able to receive some immunizations at no-cost or a reduced cost in public or non-profit health centers. Visit www.ph.lacounty.gov/ip/lZclinics/clinics.htm or call the LA County Information Line at 2-1-1 for referrals to no-cost and low-cost providers. Always call in advance to check clinic hours, fees, and which vaccines are offered.