

## Protect your child's health with regular vaccinations

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

**Y**ou're holding your newborn, and you whisper a soft promise that nothing in the world will ever harm her. Sadly, there are some things we can't control, like the common cold or their first broken hearts. But happily, thanks to decades of scientific research, we now have the ability to control many diseases that at one time caused untold pain and suffering to families everywhere.

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About 18 years ago, only eight serious diseases were preventable with vaccines. Immunizations now protect children and teens against 16 serious diseases. Not so long ago, diseases such as diphtheria, measles and pertussis — aka whooping cough — roared frighteningly through communities. Today, thanks to vaccinations, those diseases and others have been largely silenced. Thanks to successful vaccination programs, smallpox has been eradicated worldwide, and polio has been eliminated in the United States. Making sure your children receive lifesaving vaccines is one of the most important ways you can keep them healthy.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, immunizations are among the most successful public health interventions of all time. "I believe childhood immunizations have saved more lives than any other medical intervention in history," says Carrie Byington, MD, professor of pediatrics at the University of Utah and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Infectious Diseases.



"People don't realize how devastating these diseases were," Byington says. "Measles, polio...these were diseases that left children disabled, or killed children in large numbers prior to implementing the vaccine programs."

Thankfully, most vaccine-preventable



diseases have pretty much disappeared in the United States. But not so in many other countries, where measles, rubella and rotavirus, to name a few, are still quite prevalent. And consider this: Some of those germs are just a plane ride away. If not for vaccines, some diseases could spread quickly through communities.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, just a few cases of measles, for example, could quickly become "tens or hundreds of thousands" of cases if we weren't protected by vaccines.

"If we stop vaccinating, the diseases would come back. They're right there waiting to come back," says Lance Rodewald, MD, director of the Immunization Services Division at CDC.

In 2008, for example, there were a number of small outbreaks in the United States of measles because some parents declined to have their children vaccinated.

While some people have concerns over vaccines because of autism, scientific studies have shown that there is no connection.

"Categorically, vaccination does not lead to autism," Byington says. "Multiple scientific studies have found no link between vaccination and autism."

Vaccines are very safe, and when reactions do occur, they are usually minor and temporary, such as a low-grade fever or soreness or

redness at the vaccination site.

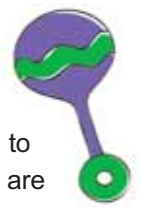
Another common misbelief is that getting a "natural" infection is better than being vaccinated, but that is just a myth. Some infections may give you lifelong immunity, but they may also result in severe disease or even death. So it is much safer for your child to receive the vaccine than to be exposed to the infection.

### How vaccines do it

Antigens are what make vaccines work. They trigger a reaction in your child's immune system that protects against infection.

"Antigens are an individual protein, or a piece of the infectious agent that your child is exposed to," Byington says.

And even though there are many more vaccines today, thanks to better vaccine technology, children are actually exposed to fewer antigens than in the past.



All children are born with a gift: antibodies that they receive from their mothers at birth, making them immune to many diseases. But this immunity doesn't last long. If your children aren't vaccinated and are exposed to disease germs, their little bodies might not be strong enough to fight them.

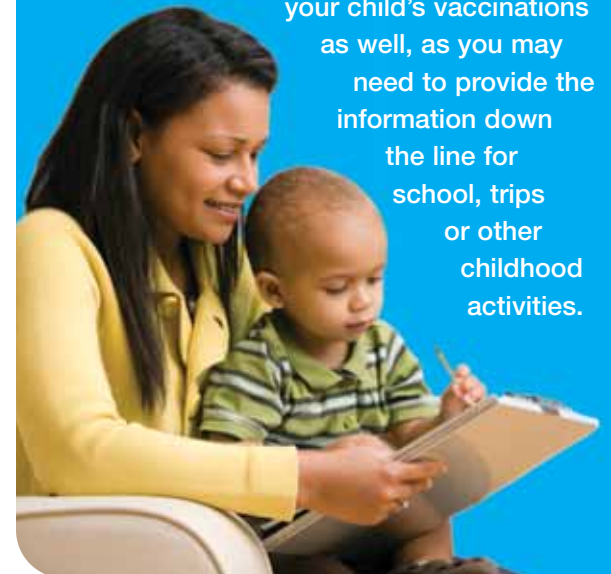
"Childhood immunizations save lives and prevent suffering of children," Rodewald says.

>> For more immunization tips, visit [www.cdc.gov/vaccines](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines)

### Start early and stay on track

In general, vaccinations should start at 6 weeks to 2 months of age. To get the best protection for your child, make sure she or he is immunized on schedule. Your health care provider is the best source of this information and can help with reminders.

Remember to keep personal records of your child's vaccinations as well, as you may need to provide the information down the line for school, trips or other childhood activities.



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