

Vaccines for Children with Disabilities

Importance of receiving recommended vaccines

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Benefits of vaccination

Vaccines benefit children by protecting against infections, helping to ensure a healthy childhood; these benefits are magnified in children with disabilities. For example, studies have shown that children with neurologic or neurodevelopment disabilities are more likely than other children to be hospitalized from respiratory infections. Looking back at the COVID-19 pandemic, people with intellectual disabilities got COVID infections at the same rate as others, but they were more than three times as likely to die. Recognizing that children with disabilities may have medical conditions that make them more susceptible to infections, it becomes critical for them to be vaccinated on time according to the recommended schedule.

Safety of vaccines

Of course, it is natural for all parents to ask, "Is this vaccine safe?" More specifically, with each vaccine, we should be considering, "Does the benefit of the vaccine outweigh the risk?" While all vaccines have at least minimal side effects of pain, redness or tenderness at the site of injection, some vaccines are associated with more severe side effects. Overall, though, vaccines are only approved and recommended when the benefits of the vaccine vastly outweigh the risks. For parents of children with disabilities, the important question to review with a healthcare provider is whether their child's health status or treatment plan changes the risks associated with a given vaccine.

Vaccines through the lifespan

Throughout the lifespan, vaccines are available to reduce infections. During the first two years of life, babies will receive vaccines to protect them from severe childhood infections (many of which are now rare, thanks to vaccination). Around 4-6 years of age, when many children enter school, additional doses of some vaccines received during infancy are given. These are critical to "remind" the child's immune system that it has seen these viruses and bacteria before, and the result is that their protective immunity becomes stronger. These reminders are called "booster" doses. Additional vaccines and boosters are recommended throughout adolescence and even, in some cases, throughout adulthood.

Because children and adults with certain conditions are at higher risk for certain infections, some vaccines have risk-based recommendations. You will want to talk with your child's healthcare providers, including any specialists they see, to ensure that they get appropriate vaccinations if a risk-based type of recommendation applies to them. Likewise, adults with chronic conditions should also regularly check with their healthcare providers about vaccines. As your child becomes more independent, it will be important that they learn to discuss their health history to ensure they receive all recommended

vaccines. Refer to the CHOP Vaccine Education Center's "[Age Group and Vaccines](#)" website to prepare for each set of vaccines as your child grows.

Making vaccination a positive experience

Numerous strategies are available to improve the vaccination experience – many of which may carry over to improve non-vaccine-related medical encounters. Prepare for and familiarize your child with what will happen. This may be through a story or role playing. This will give your child an opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns as well as to know what to anticipate when they are at the visit.

- Optimize the sensory environment. Consider reducing noise, changing the lighting, or bringing a comfortable blanket, toy, or sensory tool, particularly if your child is affected by specific environmental conditions.
- Work with the healthcare team. Ensure the healthcare provider uses communication that will be clear to your child and will be patient and understanding. You may consider alerting the healthcare provider in advance or at the beginning of the visit if they are not familiar with your child's needs.
- Provide choice when possible, such as picking which arm for the vaccine and where to sit.
- Provide positive reinforcement. Offer rewards or praise, depending on what works best with your child. Celebrate small wins that are meaningful to your child. For example, if your child is nervous about going to the vaccine visit, provide praise for getting settled in the exam room.
- Use distraction. Videos, games or a phone or tablet are all good options.

Vaccination is an important way to keep all children healthy. Children with disabilities often have a variety of medical needs, making it even more challenging to fit in conversations about vaccination during an appointment. Ensure you keep recommended vaccines top of mind at these visits and talk through any questions with your child's provider.