

Preparing for Questions Parents May Ask about Vaccines

Many parents won't have questions about vaccines when you give your strong recommendation and use language that assumes parents will accept vaccines for their child.

If a parent questions your recommendation, this does not necessarily mean they will not accept vaccines. They consider you their most trusted source of information when it comes to vaccines and sometimes parents simply want your answers to their questions. This sheet outlines some of the topics most parents ask about and tips for how to answer their questions.

Questions about the vaccine schedule and number of vaccines

Some parents may be concerned that there are too many vaccines or that their child will receive too many at one time. But, they may not understand that following the recommended vaccine schedule provides the best protection at the earliest possible time against serious diseases that may affect infants early in life.

PARENTS MAY ASK: *Can it harm my child to get several vaccines at one time? Does my child need all of the vaccines recommended?*

To respond, you can:

- Share that no evidence suggests that receiving several vaccines at one time will damage or overwhelm a healthy child's immune system.
- Explain what antigens are (parts of germs) and emphasize the small amount of antigens in vaccines compared to the antigens babies encounter every day in their environment.
- Remind parents that they must start each vaccine series on time to protect their child as soon as possible and their child must complete each multi-dose series for the best protection. There are no data to support that spacing out vaccines offers safe or effective protection from these diseases.

"There's no proven danger in getting all recommended vaccines today. Any time you delay a vaccine, you leave your baby vulnerable to disease. It's really best to stay on schedule."

Questions about whether vaccines are more dangerous for infants than the diseases they prevent

Because vaccines are very effective, many parents have not seen a case of a vaccine-preventable disease firsthand. Therefore, they may wonder if vaccines are necessary and if the risks of vaccinating infants outweigh the benefits of protection from vaccine preventable diseases.

PARENTS MAY ASK: *Are these diseases that dangerous? Is it likely that my baby will catch this disease? Will ingredients in vaccines hurt my baby more than possibly getting the disease could?* To respond, you can:

- Share your experience of how these serious diseases still exist and explain that outbreaks still occur in the U.S. For example:
 - From year to year, measles cases in the U.S. can range from roughly less than 100 to a couple hundred. However, in 2014, health departments reported cases in 667 people from 27 states.
 - Between 1970-2000, health officials reported fewer than 8,000 cases of whooping cough each year in the U.S. But since 2010, health officials have reported between 15,000 and 50,000 cases of whooping cough each year to CDC.
- Teach parents that diseases eliminated in the U.S. can infect unvaccinated babies if travelers bring the diseases from other countries. If you need up-to-date information on specific diseases, share *Disease Fact Sheets* with parents.
- Remind parents that many vaccine preventable diseases can be especially dangerous for young children and there's no way to tell in advance if their child will get a severe or mild case. Without vaccines, their child is at risk for getting seriously ill and suffering pain, disability, and even death from diseases like measles and whooping cough.

"I know you didn't get all these vaccines when you were a baby. Neither did I. However, we were both at risk of serious diseases like Hib and pneumococcal meningitis that can lead to deafness or brain damage. Today, we're able to protect your baby from 14 serious diseases before his second birthday with vaccines."

Questions about known side effects

It is reasonable for parents to be concerned about possible reactions or side effects listed on *Vaccine Information Statements*. Vaccines, like any medication, can cause some side effects. Many of these effects are minor, treatable, and last only a few days.

PARENTS MAY ASK: *Will my child be okay if she has a side effect? I know someone whose baby had a serious reaction—will my baby too?* To respond, you can:

- Remind parents that most side effects are mild and go away within a few days.
- Reassure parents that you and your staff are prepared to deal with serious vaccine reactions.
- Encourage parents to watch for possible side effects (fussiness, low-grade fever, soreness where the shot was given) and provide information on how they should treat them and how to contact you if they observe something they are concerned about.
- Share your own experience, or lack thereof, of seeing a serious side effect from a vaccine. Explain that serious side effects are very rare.

Reassure parents that the disease-prevention benefits of getting vaccines are much greater than the risks of possible side effects.



“I’ll worry if your child doesn’t get vaccines today, because the diseases can be very dangerous—most, including Hib, whooping cough, and measles, are still infecting children in the U.S. We can look at the Vaccine Information Statements together and talk about how rare serious vaccine side effects are.”

Questions about unknown serious long-term side effects

Parents who look for information about vaccine safety will likely encounter information that says vaccines can lead to serious long-term side effects from vaccines. It is understandable that parents may find this alarming.

PARENTS MAY ASK: *Do vaccines cause long-term side effects? Will getting a vaccine permanently hurt my child’s health?*

To respond, you can share that:

- Vaccines are not linked to increases in health problems such as autism, asthma, or auto-immune diseases.
- There is no evidence to suggest that vaccines threaten a long, healthy life. Conversely, we know lack of vaccination threatens a long and healthy life.

“We have years of experience with vaccines and no reason to believe that vaccines cause long-term harm. I understand your concern, but I truly believe that the risk of diseases is greater than any risks posed by vaccines. Vaccines will get your baby off to a great start for a long, healthy life.”

Questions about vaccine ingredients

Parents may ask about the ingredients contained in vaccines. Let them know that vaccines contain very small amounts of the ingredients listed below and that all ingredients play necessary roles either in making the vaccine or in ensuring that the final product is safe and effective.

PARENTS MAY ASK: *Are the ingredients in vaccines safe? Aren’t aluminum and mercury dangerous?*

- Preservatives prevent contamination of the vaccine. Thimerosal, a compound containing mercury, is a preservative only found in multi-dose vials of flu vaccine.
- Adjuvants or enhancers, such as aluminum salts, are used to help the body develop immunity and a better immune response.
- Stabilizers, such as sugars and gelatin, are used to keep the vaccine potent during transportation and storage.
- Residual cell culture materials, such as egg protein, are used to grow enough of the virus or bacteria to make the vaccine.
- Residual inactivating ingredients, such as formaldehyde, are used during the production process to kill viruses or inactivate toxins during the manufacturing process.
- Residual antibiotics, such as neomycin, are used during the vaccine manufacturing process to prevent contamination by bacteria.

“Each vaccine ingredient plays an important role in either making the vaccine or ensuring that it is safe and effective so it will protect your child.”

Questions about whether vaccines cause autism

Although many parents are aware that numerous studies show vaccines do not cause autism, some parents have lingering questions and concerns.

PARENTS MAY ASK: *I’ve heard some parents say their child’s behavior changed after vaccines; how do you know vaccines don’t cause autism?* Many rigorous studies show that there is no link between MMR vaccine or thimerosal and autism. If parents raise other possible hypotheses linking vaccines to autism, three items are key:

- Give patient and empathetic reassurance that you understand their infant’s health is their top priority, and it also is your top priority, so putting children at risk of vaccine-preventable diseases without scientific evidence of a link between vaccines and autism is a risk you are not willing to take.
- Share that the onset of autism symptoms often coincides with the timing of vaccines but is not caused by vaccines.
- Give your personal and professional opinion that vaccines are very safe.

“Autism is a challenge for many families and people want answers—including me. But well designed and conducted studies that I can share with you show that MMR vaccine is not a cause of autism.”

Resources for questions about vaccines and autism:

- [Understanding Thimerosal, Mercury, and Vaccine Safety](#)
- [Understanding MMR Vaccine Safety](#)

Additional questions parents may ask

- *Isn’t natural immunity better than the kind from vaccines?*
- *Do I have to vaccinate my baby on schedule if I’m breastfeeding him?*
- *Why are so many doses needed for each vaccine?*

If you have additional questions from parents, reference [Infant Immunization FAQs](#) for regularly updated answers to common questions.

For information on vaccines, vaccine safety, and vaccine preventable diseases, visit: www.cdc.gov/vaccines/conversations