



Vaccine Myths Debunked

With a steadily growing anti-vaccine movement, **MH** clears some common misconceptions on vaccines.

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During the last trimester, mothers pass on the antibodies to their unborn children and will continue to receive antibodies from their mothers when they take in breast milk. This form of antibodies gives the baby passive immunity as they are given rather than developed by the baby's body. However, this form of immunity is only temporary, and will decrease within months. As such, medical experts advise and recommend a schedule of vaccinations for babies and young children, to protect them from infections, where some can potentially be fatal.

Despite medical authorities around the world urging parents to get their children vaccinated, fears over the side effects that such vaccines can cause are making its rounds in the media, with vigorous campaigning by celebrities like model and anti-vaccine activist Jenny McCarthy leading the pack, right up to Robert Kennedy, Jr, American radio host and attorney. This has undoubtedly placed many parents on the cautious side when contemplating vaccinations.

In order to make an informed decision on the child's health, many have embarked on a quest to understand further the importance of these vaccines and the reason why some are vehemently against it.

Vaccination Misunderstood

Anti-vaccine activists have campaigned vigorously against vaccinations as they believe that the vaccines can cause side-effects such as autism, cancers, or that just leading a healthy lifestyle and passing that on to the child makes them an exception to receiving immunisations.

Other than misunderstanding the effects of these vaccines, there are also misconceptions on when to get the vaccinations, the quest to go as natural as possible in building up the child's immune system, as well as those who feel that their child can be exempted from being vaccinated because other children around them are vaccinated, thus decreasing the chances of their child being exposed to diseases which could be further prevented through vaccination. All these fears are unfounded

and can in fact lead to the re-emergence of such diseases in the community.

Flu Vaccine Myth – Autism and Other Bugs

Expectant mothers are often advised to be vaccinated against influenza, or more commonly known as 'flu' which will help prevent complications arising from pneumonia, bronchitis and related ailments. In fact, these antibodies will be passed on to the baby and will protect them from flu for the first few months of their lives. Having the flu while pregnant can lead to premature birth, and in severe cases, it can result in a stillbirth or death within the first week of the baby's birth.

The belief that the flu vaccine can cause autism arises as the vaccine is said to contain thimerosal, an ingredient that is claimed to be toxic to the central nervous system and said to be responsible for the increase in cases of autism among children. However, medical institutions have reviewed the evidence on the claims, and concluded that there is no link between autism and thimerosal. In any case, the preservative has already been removed from most vaccines for children.

Another common myth is that getting a flu shot would cause the receiver to fall ill with the flu.

The vaccines either contain 'inactivated' flu vaccine viruses and so are not infectious, or they are made with no flu vaccine viruses.

While many would make light of a flu infection, falling ill with the virus can have dire consequences for those with a weaker immune system. For young children and senior citizens, or those with health conditions like asthma and heart disease, the flu

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infection can add complications to an already existing health condition, or lead an otherwise healthy child or adult to a prolonged period of illness that leads to hospitalisation or in severe cases, death.

As such, it is advisable for children to get a flu shot as soon as possible.

Vitamin K Myth – Paediatric Cancers

Latest to join a list of vaccines to be avoided by the anti-vaccine camp is Vitamin K, which is a common shot for babies in the US. Babies are generally considered to be vitamin K deficient at birth, and the transfer of the nutrient from the mother to baby is insufficient to protect the baby from any possible bleeding.

Vitamin K-Deficient Bleeding, as the symptom is called, is a hemorrhagic condition to affect newborns, and can be fatal. It can

happen spontaneously in seemingly healthy babies, and sometimes presents itself as a bruise or internal bleeding, which makes it even more worrying.

In a report published by the *New Scientist* in July this year, seven babies were admitted within eight months to the Monroe Carell Jr Children’s Hospital in Vanderbilt, US, with a severe case of vitamin K deficiency bleeding. The article shares about a couple who said that they had refused the vitamin K injection for their twins as they believe it could cause leukemia. This is based on a study in the early 1990s which suggests the relation between Vitamin K and the illness, which however, have been debunked by later studies.

MMR Vaccine Myth – Autism

In an interview with Dr Anita Menon, paediatrician from Thomson Paediatric Centre (Katong), the vaccine for

measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) is the most ‘misunderstood’ vaccine.

“There is a misconception that the MMR vaccine causes autism because of a report in 1998 by a British doctor. The study was subsequently found to be seriously flawed and the paper was withdrawn by the medical journal that had published it. Unfortunately, as a result of the initial publication of the study, many parents, especially in the British Isles chose not to vaccinate their children and there was a huge spike in the number of measles infections in the years following that with some deaths,” said Dr Menon.

Due to the anti-vaccine movement, many countries are experiencing a drop in vaccination rates, and these have resulted in the resurgence of infections that could have been prevented with the vaccines.

As such, it is important for parents to know that there is no link between

the MMR vaccine and autism. Dr Menon advises that the vaccines should be given on time and not delayed as it is better to be protected against these infections at an early age. Younger unvaccinated children who get these infections may get a more severe illness with more severe complications.

Delay Vaccinations Myth

While there are fears that the number of vaccinations would overwhelm the child's health, these fears remain unfounded based on studies carried out by the University of Louisville.

The studies showed that multiple vaccinations carried out during infancy do not increase the chances of developmental delays or autism any more than a child who only takes a few vaccines during their first year.

Dr Menon advises: "Delaying the vaccines or not vaccinating your child against these viruses leaves them vulnerable to getting these infections. They may also transmit the viruses to other children who may be too young to get the vaccinations or who may have immune system disorders that may make them more susceptible to getting more severe forms of these infections."

Emphasising the importance of getting vaccinations done, Dr Menon shares a heartbreaking incident where she was involved in looking after a child who was born with an immune system disorder. Unfortunately, the child contracted the measles infection from another unvaccinated child who had the infection. Due to his low immunity, he developed severe complications to measles infection and succumbed to them.



Medical authorities from various countries are making an effort to inform and reassure parents that vaccinations for their children are safe and necessary.

Raising Awareness

As shared by Dr Menon earlier, when a parent decides not to vaccinate their child, the negative effect of their action not only impacts their child, but also the other children around them.

This is especially worrying for school going children or those at the childcare centres, where infection can spread really quickly.

In fact, there have been a number of reverts from the anti-vaccine camp to become pro-vaccine. Reasons that they have cited include how many of the anti-vaccine claims seem to

be based on conspiracy theories or studies that are outdated. If tabloid news is anything to go by, it seems that even Jenny McCarthy has jumped on board. In the Op-Ed published by Chicago Sun Times in April this year, Jenny McCarthy has said that she was never anti-vaccine and claimed that she had been campaigning for safer vaccines instead.

Nevertheless, while the anti-vaccine movement is still active, many have resorted to researching further into such claims before making a decision on their child's vaccination options. [m](#)