















The original version of this document can be found at www.hea.org.uk/campaigns/immunisation/impub.html

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. Why should I immunise my child?

Vaccines have been developed to protect people against diseases which can cause serious illness. Because vaccines have been so successful, you can now expect your immunised child to avoid getting diseases such as polio, whooping cough and measles. The result of this success has been that some diseases, like polio, no longer occur in the UK. But in other countries where immunisation is not so widely available, this is not the case. As more and more people travel abroad, there is a risk that these diseases could be brought back into the country and spread to people who have not been immunised.

Your child should have their first immunisation when he or she is 2 months old. Your health visitor, practice nurse or GP will make an appointment with you, or they will send you an appointment inviting you to bring your child for immunisation. Most surgeries and health centres run special immunisation or baby clinics and there is often a 'drop-in' facility at other times for parents who can't get to the clinic during the day. Remember, all childhood immunisations are free.

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2. What is immunisation and how does it work ?

Immunisation prepares our bodies to fight against diseases in case we come into contact with them in the future. For example, immunisation against polio stimulates the immune system to produce antibodies against polio. If your child ever comes into contact with polio, the polio antibodies will recognise the disease and be ready to fight it.

Babies are born with some natural immunity which they get from their mother and through breastfeeding. This gradually wears off as the baby's own immune system starts to develop. Having your child immunised gives extra protection against illnesses which can kill.

3. Does immunisation last for ever?

Some immunisations have to be given more than once to build up immunity (protection) or keep the level of antibodies topped up. This 'top up' is called a booster.

4. How are immunisations given and do they hurt?

All immunisations, except polio, are given with a small needle into the upper arm, thigh or buttock. Children may cry and be upset for a few minutes, but they usually settle down after a cuddle. If you don't want to be in the room when your child has the injection, tell the nurse or doctor beforehand. Some parents find it helpful to take a friend or partner to hold the child during the injection.

5. Are there any reasons why my child should not be immunised?

There are very few reasons why a child should not be immunised.

You must let your health visitor, doctor or nurse know if your child:

- has a high fever
- has had a bad reaction to another immunisation
- has had, or is having, treatment for cancer
- has a bleeding disorder - one that some children get is called ITP
- has had a severe reaction after eating eggs (see page 12), or
- has had convulsions (fits) in the past. (With the right advice, children who have had fits in the past can be immunised.)

You should also let your health visitor, doctor or nurse know if your child or any other close family member:

- has any illness which affects the immune system, for example, HIV or AIDS, or
- is taking any medicine which affects the immune system, for example, immunosuppressants (given after organ transplant or for malignant disease) or high-dose steroids

6. How do we know that vaccines are safe?

Before any vaccine can be used it has to go through many tests. Research from all over the world shows that vaccines are the safest way of protecting your child's health. Each vaccine is continually checked after it has been introduced and action is taken if it is needed. If a vaccine is not safe it is not used.

7. How will my child feel after immunisation?

All children are different. Most will not be affected. Sometimes redness and swelling may develop where the injection was given. But do not worry, it will slowly disappear. A few children may be unwell and irritable and develop a temperature.

Very rarely, children can have allergic reactions straight after immunisation. If the child is treated quickly, he or she will recover fully. People giving immunisations are trained to deal with allergic reactions.

8. How do I know if my child has a fever and what should I do?

If your child feels hot to touch and looks red or flushed, he or she probably has a fever (a temperature over 37.5°C). You can check this with a thermometer.

Treat a fever by doing the following:

- Keep your child cool by gently sponging him or her with lukewarm (not cold) water. Let the water dry on the skin.
- Make sure your child does not have too many layers of clothes or blankets on.
- Give your child extra drinks.
- Give your child Paracetamol liquid, such as Calpol, Disprol or Medinol. Read the instructions on the bottle carefully and give the dose according to your child's age. For babies it is helpful to use a special medicine syringe so you can measure the dose accurately. Ask your pharmacist for one. If necessary, give your child a second dose 4 to 6 hours later. If their temperature is still up, ask your doctor for advice.

Do not give aspirin to children under 12 years of age.

Some health visitors, nurses and doctors may tell you to give your child a dose of Paracetamol when you get home after an immunisation. In many cases this will prevent your child developing a fever.

9. When should I call the doctor?

Contact your doctor **immediately** if your child has a temperature of 39° C or above, or has a fit. If the surgery is closed and you can't contact the duty doctor, go to your nearest hospital accident and emergency department.

Follow your instincts and speak to your doctor if you are worried about your child.

10. You don't hear about most of the diseases we vaccinate against now, so is immunisation really necessary?

These diseases still exist in many parts of the world and there are still cases in this country. If your child is not immunised, he or she is still at risk.

Immunisation doesn't just protect your child and your family, it protects the whole community, especially those children who can't be immunised.

By immunising as many people as possible, fewer people will catch diseases. So the diseases will get rarer and rarer. With effective immunisation programmes, some diseases, for example, polio, mumps and measles, will disappear.

11. Wouldn't it be better for children to have the MMR vaccines separately?

No. Giving the vaccines separately would leave children exposed to measles or mumps or rubella. These can be serious and even fatal. It has been said that giving the three viruses together overloads children's immune systems. Studies show this is not the case and children's immune systems make excellent responses, protecting them against these diseases.

12. What about reports of links between autism and MMR? Is this really a risk?

No. Autism was well-known long before MMR was ever used in this country. Although autism is recognised more often now than in the past, the increases were going on long before MMR was introduced. Parents often first notice signs of autism in children after their first birthday, and MMR is usually given when children are 12 to 15 months old, so it's possible to see how people might think that there is a link with MMR. But, there is no evidence, other than coincidence, to link MMR with autism.

 **13. Have children been followed up long enough after MMR to know it's safe?**

In the US, MMR has been given for more than 25 years and around 200 million doses have been used. Autism and Crohn's disease have not been linked with MMR there. In Finland, where children have been given two doses of MMR since 1982, reactions reported after MMR were followed up. There were no reports of permanent damage due to the vaccine. A special study in Finland also showed no link between MMR and autism and Crohn's disease.

 **14. How can I get hold of copies of HEA Immunisation resources?**

- All of our leaflets are available from Marston's Book Services on 01235 465565 for a small fee.
- If you are a parent wanting a free copy, ask your GP or health visitor.
- If you are a health professional wanting a stock of leaflets, you may be able to obtain them from your local Health Promotion Unit.

The questions and answers on this page are all taken from [The Guide to Childhood Immunisations](#) and [MMR - The Facts](#).

immunisation

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