

A FEW WORDS ABOUT VACCINE SAFETY

Any parent with access to the internet, to books, to TV and radio talk shows, or the newspaper will probably be exposed to information about vaccine risk - at least some of it critical of vaccines. What are we to think of stories that tell us immunizations cause everything from hair loss to autism to multiple sclerosis? That vaccines don't really work, or that they are unnecessary because diseases would be disappearing even without them? That vaccines contain poisonous substances that will cause all sorts of serious health problems?

There is not enough space here to deal with every aspect of vaccine safety, or to address every issue that has been raised in the popular media. But you can put the idea of vaccine risk in perspective by keeping a couple things in mind:

It's not just risk, it's risk vs. benefit.

Every human activity, from riding in a car, to eating an egg, to getting out of bed in the morning, carries some risk. Sixty Americans are electrocuted each year by household wiring or appliances; over 8,000 die from falls in the home. There is no such thing as a risk-free activity. So the question is not, "Is immunization risk-free?" Nothing is risk free. The question is, "Do the risks of immunization outweigh its benefits?"

We think the answer is clear. Immunization "can be credited for saving more lives and preventing more illnesses than any medical treatment," according to U.S. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher. The benefits of immunization are obvious in the plummeting rates of diseases for which we have vaccines. The risks are either so minor (sore arm) or so rare (seizures) - or in some cases purely theoretical (autoimmune disease) - that we believe they are far outweighed by the lives saved and illness prevented by immunization.

Get the whole story.

Suppose you are looking for vaccine information on the internet, and you find a website that proclaims, "*Fifteen percent of male children who get the XYZ vaccine go on to develop prostate cancer later in life!*" You would be understandably reluctant to take your son in for his XYZ shot next week, especially if that statistic is quoted from a National Cancer Institute document. But your concern would be groundless. Why? Because what this website *doesn't* say is that about 15% of *all* males get prostate cancer sometime in their life, whether they get the XYZ vaccine or not. The vaccine has nothing to do with it.

This was a made-up example, but the media are filled with similar stories - stories that make convincing arguments that vaccines are ineffective, unnecessary or harmful. Many of them quote scientific-sounding studies or articles. These stories might be incorrect or, like the above example, misleading because they are incomplete. Some might be legitimate but taken out of context. But whatever the case, there are sure to be other websites, news stories, or articles that present other perspectives. Only by looking at all sides of an issue, and trying to get as balanced a picture as possible, will you be able to make an informed decision.

You can find information about vaccine safety on CDC's National Immunization Program website at <http://www.cdc.gov/nip>, and in some of the other references listed at the end of this booklet.