



children's defense fund

Leave No Child Behind®

VACCINES: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

This guide was prepared by the Children's Defense Fund to help parents, families, educators and others who want to understand vaccines, how they work, why they are safe and effective and how they successfully protect our children from preventable illness or even death.

“Vaccinations save lives, protect our children, and are one of the greatest public health achievements in history...We all have a part to play in keeping our communities—especially our youngest and most vulnerable—safe!”

— Jerome Adams, U.S. Surgeon General, April 29, 2019.

Why do all children need to get vaccinated?

Vaccines save lives and protect against serious long-term health consequences. Children who are unvaccinated may be unnecessarily exposed to dangerous and even deadly preventable diseases, and can also spread disease to others.

When enough people in a population are vaccinated against an infectious disease, “community immunity” protects the entire population. Community immunity helps protect those who cannot get vaccinated because they are too young, have weakened immune systems, or are part of the small portion of the population on whom vaccines are ineffective. Because people can be exposed to diseases—even those very uncommon in their community—in a variety of ways, it is only safe to stop vaccinating against a particular disease when it has been eradicated worldwide.

Vaccines are one of the greatest successes in public health and modern medicine. Vaccines can prevent deadly diseases like measles, which killed approximately 2.6 million children each year before the vaccine was developed. In the U.S., reported cases for most vaccine preventable diseases (VPDs) have decreased by 90 percent or more since the introduction of vaccines. From 1994 to 2016, childhood immunizations prevented an estimated 281 million child illnesses, 855,000 child deaths, and nearly \$1.65 trillion in health care costs. Vaccines reduce disability and suffering and contribute to longer life expectancy.

In recent years an increased number of parents have not vaccinated their children. As a result, as of July 2019, 30 states have had cases of measles, despite the fact that measles was officially eliminated in the U.S. in 2000. These outbreaks, which put children's health and lives in danger, [could be extinguished](#) if all children except those with legitimate medical reasons were vaccinated.

The Children's Defense Fund, along with all major medical associations and health organizations, supports vaccine exemptions only for legitimate medical reasons.



What diseases can be prevented by vaccines?

The full list of the 18 deadly or dangerous diseases for which vaccines are available—including measles, chickenpox, whooping cough, tetanus and polio—can be found on the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)'s website](#), with recommended vaccines by age. However vaccines are not just for children: people of all ages can and should get vaccinated against VPDs as appropriate. Some VPDs, such as whooping cough, pneumonia or flu, are more likely to be spread between younger and older people in families, so it is important that vaccination rates remain high across generations.

How do vaccines work?

Vaccines work by essentially tricking the body into thinking it has an infection so the immune system makes what it needs should it be exposed to the actual infectious agent in the future. Sometimes just one dose of a vaccine is enough to protect a person for life, but often more than one dose is needed. Because germs can spread quickly throughout a community and make a lot of people sick, it is important to have high levels of immunity against infectious VPDs within communities. **Even a single case of a VPD in a susceptible community can lead to an outbreak**, putting many—especially children, the elderly, and those with compromised health—at risk.

Are vaccines safe and effective?

Yes! Vaccination is the safest and most effective way to protect children against VPDs. Every vaccine recommended by the CDC has been and continues to be studied extensively and carefully evaluated by its Advisory Committee on Vaccine Practices, which has determined these vaccinations to be safe and effective. While vaccines can have some potential side effects, they are generally very minor and short-lived, such as soreness at the injection site or a low-grade fever.

Is it expensive to get my child vaccinated?

Vaccinations should be covered by all health insurance plans without cost, and are also free or low cost through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program. A list of state immunization program websites is available at www.vaccineinformation.org/state-immunization-programs/

“Vaccines are safe. Vaccines do not cause autism. Vaccine-preventable diseases are dangerous. It is imperative that we correct misinformation and reassure fearful parents so they protect their children from illnesses with long-lasting health impacts. I call upon healthcare providers to encourage parents, and expectant parents, to vaccinate their children for their own protection and to avoid the spread of vaccine-preventable diseases within their families and communities.”

—Robert R. Redfield, M.D., Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Additional resources for parents and pediatricians

The CDC has [resources to help guide parents through the vaccination process](#) and [also to help providers in their vaccine discussions with parents](#). Similarly, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [has materials for parents](#) with articles about immunizations, including information about their safety.