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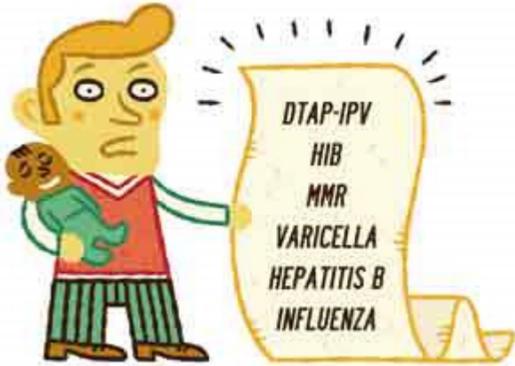
Immunizing Your Baby

The ongoing debate

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Illustration by Emmanuel Kerner



When Faustina Konkal had her first child, Rachel, now five, the Ottawa mom wasn't sure whether or not to immunize. With all the conflicting information she found on the Internet, Konkal says she didn't know what to think. "I wanted to base my decision on science, not rumours."

While Konkal chose to vaccinate her babies, her best friend, Karine Le Moullec-Brillon of Strathmore, Alta., decided not to. Le Moullec-Brillon had experienced allergic reactions to vaccines as a child. After consultations with doctors, and months of research, she and her husband decided not to take the same risk with their kids, Alec and Éliane (now seven and three.) "We're deciding on a vax-by-vax, child-by-child basis," she explains.

"The perfect vaccine doesn't exist, and we can't always predict how an individual's immune system will react," explains Dr. David Allison, the medical officer of health for St. John's, Nfld. "But vaccines are our best defence against disease."

While only you can decide what's best for your child, Dr. Allison suggests parents can best answer the "to vax or not to vax" question "by understanding the benefits and risks of vaccines, as well as the significant risks posed by contracting some of these diseases."

Tips to Ease the Trauma

Shots are no fun for you or your baby, but Dr. Terry Polevoy, who often works with children at a walk-in clinic in Waterloo, Ont., suggests you'll both get through it better if your baby is well rested and offered a comforting toy or blanket. You can also try these tips:

- Try nursing after the shot to provide comfort.
- Look calm. Your baby will take the lead from you.
- Afterward, your baby may be sleepier than normal, run a low-grade fever, and have

redness and swelling around the injection site. Use acetaminophen and cold cloths to provide relief.

- Allergic reactions are extremely uncommon, but if you notice a high fever, breathing difficulties, hives, seizures, or any unusual symptoms, call your doctor immediately.

When Not to Immunize

The general rule is if your child has an immune deficiency, live vaccines (chickenpox, measles and mumps) are inappropriate. If your child has a severe reaction to an immunization (hives, swelling of the face or lips, or anaphylaxis), most doctors will suggest foregoing further vaccinations until you establish the cause.

Some parents opt to delay vaccines while trying to decide or while waiting out a minor illness. The problem with this, says Dr. Allison, is that the illnesses being vaccinated against are most damaging to the very young. The Canadian Paediatric Society suggests that reasons to delay are rare and highly individual, but in general terms, if children have a serious illness or a high fever (over 39.9 C), a progressive neurological condition or uncontrolled seizures, options should be discussed with a doctor.

Writer Diane Selkirk discovered that immunization is just one of many complex decisions that come with parenthood.

Vaccination facts

The immunization schedule varies between provinces, but a typical first-year timetable includes several long-established vaccinations, as well as some new additions:

Vaccine: DTaP-IPV

Given At: two, four and six months

Protects Against: diphtheria, tetanus (lockjaw), pertussis (whooping cough) and polio

Vaccine: Hib

Given At: two, four and six months

Protects Against: haemophilus influenzae (previously a common cause of meningitis)

Vaccine: MMR

Given At: 12 months and again at 18 months

Protects Against: MMR is a combo shot that protects against measles (red measles), mumps and rubella (German measles)

Vaccine: Varicella

Given At: 12 months

Protects Against: Protects against chicken pox

Vaccine: Hepatitis B

Given At: birth (if high-risk); two, four and six months (in B.C., N.B., P.E.I. and the territories); or in grades 4 to 7 (remaining provinces)

Protects Against: Hepatitis B (a virus that affects the liver) can be passed from mother to infant and is most commonly found in young adults

Vaccine: Meningococcal C conjugate

Given At: two, four and six months, or a single shot at 12 months (grade 4 in Man.)

Protects Against: Group C meningococcal meningitis

Vaccine: Influenza

Given At: recommended for infants between six months and 23 months as well as those living in same household

Protects Against: Flu