Frequently Asked Questions

- **Why are vaccinations important?**

  Vaccinations protect your child against serious diseases by stimulating the immune system to create antibodies against certain bacteria or viruses.

- **What do vaccines do?**

  Vaccines work by preparing the body to fight illness. Each contains either a dead or a weakened germ (or parts of it) that causes a particular disease.
  The body practices fighting the disease by making antibodies that recognize specific parts of that germ. This permanent or longstanding response means that if someone is ever exposed to the actual disease, the antibodies are already in place and the body knows how to combat it and the person doesn't get sick. This is called **immunity**.

- **I don’t know anybody who has had these diseases. Why does my baby need these vaccines?**

  While a few of these diseases have virtually disappeared because of vaccination, outbreaks of measles and whooping cough still occur in Ghana. Even if some diseases do completely disappear in the country, they are common in other parts of the world and are just a plane ride away. If we stop vaccinating against these diseases, many more people will become infected. Vaccinating your child will keep him or her safe.

- **Are there better ways to protect my baby against these diseases?**

  No. Breastfeeding offers temporary immunity against some minor infections like colds, but it is not an effective means of protecting a child from the specific diseases prevented by vaccines. Likewise, vitamins won’t protect against the bacteria and viruses that cause these serious diseases. Chiropractic remedies, naturopathy, and homeopathy are totally ineffective in preventing vaccine-preventable diseases.

  Some parents think that getting the “natural” disease is preferable to “artificial” vaccination, leading to a “natural” immunity. Some even arrange chickenpox “parties” to ensure their child gets infected. It’s true that for some diseases, getting infected will lead to immunity, but the price paid for natural disease can include paralysis, brain injury, liver cancer, deafness, blindness, or even death. When you consider the seriousness of these risks, vaccination is definitely the better choice.

- **Are vaccines safe?**

  Vaccines used in national immunization programmes are considered safe and effective. Rigorous procedures are followed before registration and ale but there is no such thing as a ‘perfect’ vaccine which has no adverse events.

  Vaccination programmes are usually complex in nature and in spite of all precautions taken, some people may be affected by adverse events following immunization (AEFI) caused by vaccine product (s) and or composition or by an error in its administration or in most cases, such events may be unrelated to vaccines or vaccination at all.

- **What if my baby has a cold or fever, or is taking antibiotics? Can he or she still get vaccinated?**

  Yes. Your child can still get vaccinated if he or she has a mild illness, a low-grade fever, or is taking antibiotics. Talk with your child's healthcare provider if you have questions.

- **How many times do I need to bring my baby in for vaccinations?**

  At least five visits are needed before age two, but the visits can be timed to coincide with well-child check-ups. Your baby should get the first vaccine (hepatitis B) at birth, while still in the hospital. Multiple visits during the first two years are necessary because there are 14 diseases your baby can be protected against, and most require two or more doses of vaccine for the best protection.

- **How do I know when to take my baby in for vaccinations?**

  Your healthcare provider should let you know when the next doses are due. For infants most vaccinations are given on a 2, 4 and 6 month schedule. If you are not sure, call your healthcare provider's office to find out when your child should return for vaccinations. Doses cannot be given too close together or immunity doesn't have time to build up. On the other hand, you don't want to delay your child's vaccinations and get behind schedule because during this time, your child remains unprotected against these serious diseases.

- **What if I miss an appointment? Does my baby have to start the vaccines all over again?**

  No. If your baby misses some doses, it's not necessary to start over. Your provider will continue from where he or she left off.

- **How do I keep track of my baby's vaccinations?**

  In many medical practices, your child's immunization record is entered into an electronic record-keeping system. It's important that you keep home records too, so be sure to ask for a personal record card or a printed copy of your child's vaccinations. If you don't receive it, be sure to ask. Bring your copy of the record to all medical appointments. Whenever your child receives a vaccine, make sure your copy gets updated. Your child will benefit by having an accurate vaccination record throughout his or her life.

- **What if I can't afford to get my child vaccinated?**

  Your child's health depends on timely vaccinations. Vaccinations are free or low cost for children when families can't afford them through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program. Call your healthcare provider or local/state health department to find out where to go for affordable vaccinations. You can access a listing of contacts for your state's VFC program at https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/vfc/contacts-state.html.

- **Why is it important that all children get vaccinated?**

  Unvaccinated children are capable of spreading the disease to other children, even those who have been vaccinated since no vaccine is 100% protective.

  In the U.S., vaccinations have decreased most vaccine-preventable childhood diseases by more than 95 percent (see www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4037.pdf for examples). Vaccines have minimized or eliminated outbreaks of certain diseases that were once lethal to large numbers of people, including measles and polio in the U.S and smallpox worldwide. But because the bacteria and viruses that cause diseases still exist, the public health gains achieved through

vaccines can only be maintained by ensuring that vaccination rates remain high enough to prevent outbreaks.

Vaccines are effective not only because they protect individuals who have been vaccinated but also because they confer a broader protection for communities by establishing "herd immunity." When a sufficiently high proportion of a population is vaccinated against infectious diseases, the entire population can obtain protection.

Herd immunity is critical for protecting the health of many groups of people who are especially vulnerable to communicable diseases: those who cannot be vaccinated, either because they are too young or because a medical condition makes vaccination too risky.

- **I thought vaccines were just for babies, do adults really need to get vaccinated?**

  Vaccination is as important for adults as it is for children, and yet many adults are not optimally vaccinated. Adults need vaccines because vaccine immunity (protection) may have diminished over time and a person will need a booster shot to enhance protection. For some diseases like whooping cough, adults who are vaccinated prevent the spread of disease and in turn protect children. There are also new vaccines, such as the shingles vaccine, that protect against diseases/conditions that develop in adults.

- **Where can adults get vaccinated?**

  Check with your clinic to see if they administer vaccines. Additionally, your **local health department** or local hospital may administer influenza, pneumococcal, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and Tdap vaccines. Many pharmacies offer these and other immunizations. Clinics may also be available in shopping malls, grocery stores, senior centers, and other community settings.

- **I'm an adult, how do I pay for vaccines?**

  Out-of-pocket immunization costs may vary depending on your insurance coverage. Check with your doctor or clinic and your health insurance plan to determine your costs. For Medicare beneficiaries, both influenza and pneumococcal vaccinations are paid for by Medicare Part B if your healthcare provider accepts the Medicare-approved payment. Shingles vaccine is covered under Medicare Part D.

- **Do vaccines have side effects?**

  Vaccines are among the safest medicines available. Some common side effects are a sore arm or fever. There is a very small risk that a serious problems could occur after getting a vaccine. However, the potential risks from the diseases vaccines prevent are much greater than the potential risks associated with the vaccines themselves.

- **I'm traveling abroad, what vaccinations do I need?**

  Contact your doctor or your local health department as early as possible to find out which immunizations you may need. Vaccines against certain diseases, such as **hepatitis A**, **hepatitis B**, **yellow fever**, and **typhoid fever**, are recommended for different countries. The time required to receive all immunizations will depend on whether you need one shot or a series of shots. You can also visit the **CDC's Travelers' Health Website** for up-to-date information on immunization recommendations for international travelers.

Will the vaccine give someone the disease it's supposed to prevent?

This is one of the most common concerns about vaccines. However, it's *impossible* to get the disease from any vaccine made with dead (killed) bacteria or viruses or just part of the bacteria or virus.

Only those immunizations made from weakened (also called **attenuated**) live viruses — like the chickenpox (varicella) or measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine — could possibly make a child develop a mild form of the disease. But it's almost always *much less severe* than would happen if someone is infected with the disease-causing virus itself. However, for kids with weakened immune systems, such as those being treated for cancer, these vaccines may cause problems.

The risk of disease from vaccination is extremely small. One live virus vaccine that's no longer used in the United States is the oral polio vaccine (OPV). The success of the polio vaccination program has made it possible to replace the live virus vaccine with a killed virus form known as the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV). This change has completely eliminated the possibility of polio disease being caused by immunization in the United States.