



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Guide to Immunizations

Gayle Stone of Atlanta recalls as a child suffering the itchy bumps of chicken pox, the swollen jaws of mumps and the irritating rash of the measles. Fortunately, all cases were mild enough to not cause any lasting damage.

But she didn't take any chances when her daughter Simone was born 12 years ago. She made sure Simone received every vaccine recommended to protect her from those childhood diseases and any others.

"Like other parents, I felt it was better to protect my child than take any chances," Stone said. "I remember having the mumps, chicken pox and the measles, and it wasn't pleasant. I don't remember ever getting immunized when I was a child."

As schools reopen nationwide, immunizations are on the mind of many parents, who are required to provide vaccination records for school attendance. Immunizations, however, are important for all age groups. The federal government has launched initiatives to improve immunization levels for adults and children to protect society from outbreaks of potentially deadly diseases.

While most people favor immunizing their children and themselves, others fear the risk that vaccines will do more serious harm than good.

For many African Americans, there's mistrust of public health officials for many historical reasons, or because of their own bad experiences with doctors.

Most experts, however, say that vaccines are among the safest medicines. Their benefits far outweigh the risks. Immunizations remain the best defense against major disease epidemics that used to sicken and kill thousands in this country—diseases that are colorblind.

"People tell me that you don't know what's in vaccines," Atlanta pediatrician Lorene Littles says of parents who refuse to have their children immunized. "Others have said, 'God will take care of him.'"

"People want to blame the MMR [measles, mumps, rubella] vaccine for autism. That's not true," Littles adds. "There's a lot of misinformation out

there. Immunizations protect our communities and future generations from potentially deadly diseases."

Despite notable success in virtually wiping out cases of mumps, measles, polio, and other vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States, raising the immunization rate remains a public health challenge. In addition to the racial health disparities that still exist, there's also increased international travel and contact with people from other countries who have not been immunized. Health organizations are trying to allay fears and educate and improve access with public awareness campaigns and free immunization sites.

"People have gotten complacent. They have forgotten, or they are so young they don't remember what it was like before we had vaccines," said Sharon Hoskins, Public Affairs Specialist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Immunization Program. "Even though they [diseases] are rare today, there was a time in this country when we had thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of people with these diseases, and many had high fatality rates."

To address racial disparities, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 1998 included child and adult immunization in its ambitious Race and Ethnic Health Disparities Initiative to eliminate gaps in six health areas by the year 2010, an initiative supported and enhanced by the new presidential administration.

In 1999, the vaccination rate was 75.6 percent for white children and 69.4 percent for black children. The goal is 90 percent immunization coverage for all races by 2010, Hoskins said.

From birth to age 2, children should receive a series of shots to protect their fragile and developing immune systems. Immunizing children also protects others in their family, and protects them in their child care center or school. A case of chicken pox may be mild in a child, but if passed on to an adult the disease often causes severe complications, even death.

Adolescents and adults should get booster shots for diphtheria and tetanus. Adults over 65 and those with chronic health problems like diabetes or heart disease should get annual flu and pneumococcal vaccines. The hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for children over age 2 and others living in certain regions with outbreaks of the disease and for adolescents who have chronic liver disease, use illegal injections, or are male and have sex with other males.

Here's a list of recommended vaccines children should receive by age 2. The shots can be given over five visits to a doctor or clinic. They include:

- 4 doses of diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTaP)
- 4 doses of Hib vaccine (prevents *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, leading cause of bacterial meningitis in children)
- 3 doses of polio vaccine
- 3 doses of hepatitis B vaccine
- 3 doses of pneumococcal vaccine
- 1 dose of measles, mumps and rubella vaccine (MMR)
- 1 dose of varicella (chickenpox) vaccine

For more information, try these sources:

- National Women's Health Information Center at 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit <http://www.4woman.gov>
- CDC National Immunization Hotline at 1-800-232-2522 (English) or 1-800-232-0233 (Spanish). Or visit the CDC's Web site at [www.cdc.gov/nip](http://www.cdc.gov/nip)
- Read more about the Race and Ethnic Health Disparities Initiative at <http://raceandhealth.hhs.gov/>

Finding out more information about vaccines you need can lead you down a path to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to subscribe to the listserv to receive tips on improving your health, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.*