

How to answer patients' questions about vaccinations

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Staff News Writer

The issue of vaccinations recently has dominated the news, and it's likely that your patients will be asking questions about the safety of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine for children. Here's what you need to know when you get these questions.

If you're talking to patients about the MMR vaccine, it's likely that they will ask you about links between the vaccine and autism. All reputable scientific studies have found no relationship between the vaccine and autism. Most concerns stem from a 1998 study published in the *Lancet* in the United Kingdom, in which an author claimed that MMR vaccine could contribute to the development of autism. Data in this article were proven to have been fabricated, the article was retracted, and the author discredited. This article was followed by many large, well-designed population-based studies that found no link between the MMR vaccine and autism.

The AMA supports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) policy on vaccinations, including use of the MMR vaccine, and endorses the comprehensive vaccine recommendations developed by the Advisory Committee for Immunization Practices. The following information can help you set the record straight with your patients.

Messages for patients

- **The CDC recommends two doses of the MMR vaccine for children to provide protection against three potentially serious viral diseases: measles, mumps, and rubella.** The MMR vaccine has a long record of safety. Serious adverse reactions from MMR are rare. Severe allergic reactions occur less than 1 time per 1,000,000 vaccine doses.
- **Today's MMR vaccine provides longer-lasting protection and has fewer side effects.** The measles component in MMR vaccine in use today has been in use since 1968, the mumps component since 1967, and the rubella component since 1979. All of these vaccine components replaced earlier versions.
- **People still get measles, even though the disease was declared eliminated.** Since 2000, when measles was declared eliminated from the United States, the annual number of people reported to have measles ranged from a low of 37 people in 2004 to a high of 644

people in 2014. Though a vaccine-preventable disease may be nearly eradicated in the United States, the infectious agent that causes disease can continue to circulate in other parts of the world. These agents can cross geographical borders and infect anyone who is not protected.

- **Measles is highly contagious and serious disease that can be spread through the air before the infected person has symptoms.** The virus can spread to others through coughing and sneezing. Measles is so contagious that if one person has the disease, most people who are close to that person and who are not immune will also become infected.

While any serious injury or death caused by vaccines is one too many, the benefits of vaccination greatly outweigh the risk, and many more injuries and deaths would occur without vaccines.

Patient resources

- Fact sheet about the MMR vaccine, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Myths and facts about vaccination, World Health Organization

Physician resources

- Clinical resources, Immunization Action Coalition