Protecting Children from Preventable Disease

It's 1974. A doctor is ready to make a slit in the throat of a small boy to help him breathe. An infection caused by Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) has almost closed his throat. In 1974, many children who got this infection died. Others suffered brain damage from lack of oxygen. Today, vaccines can guard children against the Hib virus and other diseases. Here are some answers to questions that Illinois parents often ask about immunizations.

Why do children need immunizations?

- The viruses and bacteria that cause illness still exist. They can be carried to any community. Every year they cause outbreaks of childhood illnesses.
- Vaccines help prevent specific diseases. Some of these diseases can be fatal or cause permanent damage to a child. These include diphtheria and polio. Other diseases may affect some children more severely than others. A mumps infection may be mild or leave a child deaf. A case of measles can cause a rash or lead to brain swelling.
- Immunizing babies may lower their risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome).
- Illinois laws require some vaccinations before children can enter child care or school.
- When most people are immune to a disease, it cannot spread easily. This helps to protect children who are too ill or too young to be vaccinated.

Can the vaccines harm my child?

- Vaccines are much safer than the diseases they prevent. They are widely tested. A vaccine is monitored for safety as long as it is being used.
- Talk to your health care provider before your child is vaccinated. Tell her if your child is ill, has allergies, or has had a bad reaction to any vaccines or medicines.
- Any medicine can cause side effects. The injection site may be sore. Your child may have a mild fever. Only a few out of a million shots cause a severe reaction.
- Extensive scientific research has found no connection between vaccines and autism.

Who decides on the immunization schedule?

- Doctors and disease experts design a schedule based on recent research.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the American Academy of Family Physicians approve the schedule.
- Your child's doctor should recommend the best schedule for your child.

Is it okay for an infant or small child to get so many immunizations?

- A healthy child's body reacts to 2,000–6,000 antigens (part of a germ) every day. These antigens come from what she touches, eats, and breathes in. They cause a child's body to produce antibodies that help prevent disease.
- The entire set of recommended vaccines contains about 150 antigens. The antigens are altered so they will not cause disease. They stimulate the body to make protective antibodies. A healthy child is well able to handle several vaccines over a short time.
- Postponing vaccinations leaves a child unprotected against serious or fatal illnesses.

For related Web resources, see "Protecting Children from Preventable Disease" at http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm

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