

“I’m a new mum and have to admit that I can’t make up my mind about getting my baby immunized. A friend in mother’s group told me some terrifying stuff about the MMR jab the other day and now I’m in a bigger quandary.”

Immunisations are available against many of the most dangerous diseases of early childhood. In the past, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough and measles accounted for more childhood deaths than any other cause. Since the introduction of immunisations, the incidence of these diseases has reduced so dramatically that nowadays they are rarely seen. If the immunisation rates drop, it is likely that these diseases will recur. Whooping cough is still prevalent in our society, spread primarily via adults who have not had a booster shot. If a young infant contracts whooping cough, they usually become very unwell and often require hospitalisation. They will sometimes require admission to Intensive Care and support with breathing. Whooping cough can even result in brain damage or death. Whooping cough vaccine is given (with other vaccines) at 2, 4 and 6 months. A baby is not fully covered until all 3 doses have been given. Adults who are in contact with infants should check that their immunisations are also up to date. The MMR (measles/mumps/rubella vaccine), given at 12 months of age, has frequently been implicated as a trigger to autism in children but there is no scientific evidence to support this claim. It is true, however, that if a child contracts measles, there is a risk of permanent severe brain damage or death.

All immunisations may have some side effects but they are usually mild. The benefits of immunisation are much greater than the potential risks! The most common side effect is pain and swelling at the site of injection. Other side effects include fever and irritability or acute allergic reaction. With the new vaccines, side effects are becoming less common. If your child has a progressive neurological illness, immunisations should be postponed until a firm diagnosis has been made and your specialist has been consulted. If your child had a seizure within 24 hours of a previous immunisation or had an allergic reaction (rash and swelling) following a previous immunisation, specialist review should be sought prior to further immunisations. Immunisation is not compulsory but it is encouraged as it is for the greater good of the community and our children. Your child is able to attend daycare and school even if unimmunised. If you choose not to immunise your child, they will be sent home from school whenever there is a risk of infection.