

The Childhood Immunization Schedule: Why Are Immunizations So Important?

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As parents, we are constantly concerned about keeping our children safe and healthy. To protect them, we put them in child safety seats and install childproof door latches. One of the most important ways we protect our children is to follow the childhood immunization schedule and get them vaccinated against serious but preventable diseases.

Vaccines are one of the medicine's greatest triumphs because they prevent serious disease and death. Many once common infectious diseases such as polio, mumps, whooping cough, and rubella (German measles), are now only distant memories for most Americans. Today in the United States, we have few reminders of the suffering, disabilities, and premature deaths caused by these vaccine-preventable diseases.

Many of today's parents have never even seen the diseases that vaccines prevent and don't fully understand the significance of following the childhood immunization schedule. Instead, a parent may ask, "Why does my baby need so many shots?"

Before age two, every child should be immunized against 12 potentially serious vaccine-preventable diseases: measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib disease), hepatitis B, varicella (chickenpox), pneumococcal disease and influenza. At least one shot is needed for each of these diseases, and for a few diseases, several doses are needed for the best protection.

Vaccines are given at this early age because the diseases they prevent are far more serious or common among babies or young children. Up to 60 percent of severe disease caused by Hib in children is among babies less than 12 months of age. Moreover, 90 percent of all deaths from whooping cough are among children under six months of age. The ages that doctors recommend vaccines in the immunization schedule are not

arbitrary. They were chosen to give our children the earliest and best protection against disease.

Vaccinating a child according to the immunization schedule protects not only that child but also the entire community. Every day in the United States, there are 11,000 children born who need to be fully immunized before two years of age. The 12 diseases that infant immunizations prevent still exist and circulate in many parts of the world. For children who are not immune these diseases can still lead to pneumonia, blood infections, brain damage, liver, kidney or heart problems, skin deformation and blindness.

Talk to your child's health care provider about the childhood immunization schedule. Following it is one of the best ways parents can protect their children's health.