What If You Don't Vaccinate Your Child?

Your child is at risk for developing a vaccine-preventable disease

Vaccines were developed to protect people from dangerous and often fatal diseases. These diseases remain a threat. Vaccines are safe and effective protection. Vaccination in childhood prevents serious illness and lifelong disability from certain vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs). People not vaccinated as children are vulnerable to VPDs and their consequences as adults.

Rubella (sometimes called German measles) can cause severe disabilities in infants whose mothers got rubella during their pregnancy. Rubella can cause miscarriages, stillbirths, deafness, heart defects, cataracts, and developmental delays in babies, leading to lifelong disabilities. While rubella is now very rare in the U.S., rubella still occurs and has been brought into the U.S. from other countries. Falling MMR vaccination rates during childhood means more people won't have protection from rubella before or during pregnancy.

Measles is a highly contagious disease that can lead to serious complications, including death. It remains common in many countries and has been brought into the U.S. by returning vacationers and foreign visitors. High vaccination rates caused measles to decline rapidly during the 1990s. However, drops in MMR vaccination in some communities have led to a resurgence in 2025.

Pertussis or "whooping cough" is an extremely dangerous disease for babies. It is not easily treated and can result in permanent brain damage or death. Whooping cough is most dangerous in children younger than one year. Many infants with whooping cough have to be hospitalized and each year some babies die. In 2024, over 35,000 cases of whooping cough were reported in the U.S. It is hard to protect unvaccinated babies from whooping cough because it is very contagious and often not recognized in adults and older children who may only have a mild cough with no fever. The best protection for babies younger than 3 months is their mother's vaccination during pregnancy. Babies start a 4-dose vaccine series at age 2 months but only have partial protection until they complete the series.

Chickenpox is very contagious. Before the vaccine, approximately 8,000 to 18,000 chickenpox hospitalizations and 100 deaths occurred each year in the U.S., mostly among previously healthy children. Chickenpox-infected-children must be kept out of daycare or school for a week or more so they don't spread the disease to others.

Influenza or "flu" is a serious respiratory disease that can be deadly. Healthy babies and toddlers are especially vulnerable to complications from influenza. Every year in the U.S., thousands of children are hospitalized and an average of 138 die of influenza.

Your child can infect others in the community

Children who are not vaccinated can spread vaccine-preventable diseases to others.

- Unvaccinated children can infect babies who are too young to be fully immunized.
- Unvaccinated children can infect pregnant women, the elderly, and immune-compromised people who may not be able to get vaccinated or would have a weak immune response.

Your child may have to be excluded from school or child care

During disease outbreaks, unvaccinated children may be excluded from school or child care to protect them and others. This can cause hardship for children and parents.

Next steps…

We strongly encourage you to discuss any concerns you have with a trusted healthcare provider or call your local or state health department. Your vaccination decision affects not only the health of your child, but also your family and your community.

For more information about vaccines, visit these websites:

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.healthychildren.org/english/safety-prevention/immunizations/pages/default.aspx

Vaccinate Your Family
www.vaccinateyourfamily.org

Immunize.org
www.immunize.org
www.LetsGetRealAboutVaccines.org

Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
www.chop.edu/vaccine-education-center