

# When parents choose not to vaccinate: Risks and responsibilities

Parents are responsible for their child's health and well-being, including protecting them from vaccine-preventable diseases. The Canadian Paediatric Society urges **all** children to receive routine vaccinations, an annual influenza (flu) vaccine, and an annual COVID-19 vaccine, unless there is a medical reason not to.

If you choose not to vaccinate your child, you should understand the risks. You need to know how to make it less likely that your child gets an infection or spreads disease to others.

## Protecting your child

Infant and childhood vaccines prevent diseases that can be serious and even deadly. Some examples:

- Measles can cause brain swelling, which can lead to brain damage or death.
- Mumps can cause permanent deafness.
- Meningitis can also lead to permanent deafness or brain damage.
- Polio can cause permanent paralysis.

Any child can be exposed to these infections. While avoiding contact with sick people is useful, your child may come in contact with people who are carrying germs, even if they are well. Infections like measles can also spread through the air and can be spread by an infected person who is not yet sick.

There are no treatments or cures for diseases like measles, mumps and polio. The only proven way to protect your child is with vaccines.

# Protecting others

Delaying or refusing some or all vaccines for your child puts their health and life at risk. It also risks the health of other people. Those most at risk include:

- People with weakened immune systems due to other diseases or medications they are taking.
- People with chronic medical conditions like lung, heart, liver, kidney disease or diabetes.
- Newborn babies, who are too young to be vaccinated against most diseases.
- The elderly, who may be at higher risk of complications from diseases.

Communities depend on high immunization rates to keep vaccine-preventable diseases from spreading. When more people are immunized, there is less risk for everyone. The more parents that choose to not vaccinate their children, the greater the risk that infection will spread in the community.

If you choose not to fully vaccinate your child, follow these steps:

- If your child is sick and you call or visit a health care provider, immediately tell office staff and the doctor that your child is not vaccinated (whether for some or all vaccines). They will consider the possibility that your child has a vaccine-preventable disease, which may affect what tests they do. If your child has a vaccine-preventable disease, precautions can be taken so that the disease does not spread to others.
- Always keep vaccine records accessible so that you can report which vaccines your child has received, if any.

## You choose not to vaccinate your child, and a vaccine-preventable disease is active in your community

- Consider changing your mind and protecting your child with a vaccine. Talk to your child's doctor or to someone at a public health clinic.
- Your child may be asked to stay away from school, child care or other organized activities. You will be advised when it is safe for your child to return. Be prepared to keep your child home for up to several weeks.

- Learn about the disease and how it spreads, although it may be impossible to avoid exposure.
- Each disease is different. The time between when your child may have been exposed and when they may get sick will vary. Talk to your child's doctor to find out when your child is no longer at risk of coming down with the disease.
- If you know that your child has been exposed to a vaccine-preventable disease, learn what symptoms to look for and get urgent medical care if these develop.
- Follow recommendations to separate your child from others, including family members – especially newborn babies, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems or chronic diseases.

## Tetanus: Vaccination is the best protection

- Tetanus (also called lockjaw) is a serious disease caused by germs found in the soil. There is no “community protection” against tetanus. It does not spread from child to child. If your child is not vaccinated against tetanus, they are at risk.
- Even a minor cut or wound that has a tiny bit of soil in it can cause an infection. Over 10% of children and adults who get tetanus will die, even with the best intensive care.
- Over half of those who get tetanus have no history of a major cut or injury, so if your child becomes sick, make sure the doctor knows right away that they are not vaccinated. If your child has not received at least 3 doses of tetanus vaccine and has a major cut or injury, they should be given a special blood product called “tetanus immune globulin” as soon as possible to prevent tetanus.

## Travelling without vaccination

- When travelling to another country, you and your family may be at risk for vaccine-preventable diseases. These may include diseases for which vaccines are not routinely given in Canada.
- Learn about possible infection risks where you're going. In many countries, vaccination rates are lower than in Canada. This means you may be exposed to infections that are rare in Canada.
- If your child gets sick, they may not receive the same quality medical care they would get at home. Consider having your child vaccinated before travelling to such

countries.

- Children with vaccine-preventable diseases may be refused permission to travel by public transport (air, train or bus).

Adapted from *If You Choose Not to Vaccinate Your Child, Understand the Risks and Responsibilities* (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe).

## Additional resources

- If You Choose Not to Vaccinate Your Child, Understand the Risks and Responsibilities (WHO Europe)

(<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/disease-prevention/vaccines-and-immunization/publications/2012/if-you-choose-not-to-vaccinate-your-child,-understand-the-risks-and-responsibilities>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Infectious Diseases and Immunization Committee

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