



DOCTOR DISCUSSION GUIDE

Understanding Childhood Vaccines

Childhood vaccination can be an intense but important experience for kids and parents alike. Getting comfortable with some of the more common terms and questions regarding vaccination can help make your child's well-child visit go more smoothly. Familiarize yourself with these common terms before your appointment to help facilitate your discussion.

Vocabulary to Know

Your doctor might mention these common terms. Here's what they mean.

Antigen	A foreign substance, like a virus or bacteria, that prompts the body's immune system to activate. Vaccines work by introducing small amounts of antigens into the body so that the immune system creates antibodies to protect against wild forms of them.
Antibody	An antibody protects the body by latching onto foreign substances (like viruses or bacteria) and destroying them. Antibodies are specific to a particular antigen, so it can take a week or two for them to develop. Vaccines help the body prepare these antibodies in advance, so that if it encounters the germs again in the future, the antibodies are ready and waiting to defend against them.
Adjuvant	Substances added to some vaccines to make them more effective. Some adjuvants, like aluminum salts, have been included in vaccines for more than 70 years, and all are tested for safety before they can be used in U.S. vaccines.
Live Vaccines	While some vaccines are made using inactivated (or "killed") viruses or bacteria, this type of vaccine uses live germs that have been modified in the laboratory so they don't cause disease in healthy people.
Adverse Event	Unwanted effects after vaccination that may or may not be the result of the vaccine.
Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS)	A tool anyone can use to report an adverse event following a vaccine dose—even if they aren't sure the vaccine was the cause. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention then uses the information to spot potential vaccine side effects or risks posed by vaccination in certain populations.
Thimerosal	Thimerosal used to be a preservative in vaccines that contained a type of mercury. While there's no evidence the ingredient was ever harmful, it was removed from all childhood vaccines in the early 2000s. Now, the ingredient is only found in some flu vaccines, though parents can ask for a thimerosal-free formulation if they'd prefer it.
Contraindication	A circumstance or condition (like a weakened immune system) when a vaccine should not be given because it poses too much of a risk for the individual.
ACIP	A panel that makes the childhood and adult vaccination schedules in the United States. This panel, comprised of public health and medical experts, meets often to review all available research on U.S. vaccines approved for use, as well as data on vaccine-preventable diseases. They use this information to guide doctors and other health care providers on who should be vaccinated and when.



Questions to Ask

These questions will help you start a conversation with your doctor about vaccination.

About How Vaccines Work

- How do vaccines work exactly?
- Does getting vaccinated guarantee my child won't get these diseases?
- What can I do to make getting vaccinated less stressful or painful for my child?

About Benefits of Vaccination

- What diseases do these vaccines prevent?
- Why is it important for my child to get these vaccines?
- Who decides the vaccination schedule, and why do you think it's important to follow it?

About Vaccine Safety

- What are the risks of vaccinating? How do they compare to risks of diseases like measles or the flu?
- What are the side effects of these vaccines? What should I do if my child experiences one?
- How are vaccines tested for safety?
- Can you talk to me a little about the kinds of ingredients in vaccines? How do you know they're safe?

About Vaccination in the Community

- What is herd immunity, and how does it affect my child's health and safety?
- There are some unvaccinated students in my child's classroom. Should I be worried?
- How should I talk to friends or family who are against vaccination?

About Follow-Up

- When does my child need to come back for vaccines?
- If I have more questions or concerns about vaccines, where can I go for more information?
- Are there any adult vaccines you think I should talk to my doctor about to help me better protect my child?
