

WELL INFORMED

Vaccines Kids Need

An Age-by-Age Guide—Our expert explains why vaccines are safe and crucial to keeping kids healthy.

By | Barbara Brody, Writer



Photo credit: Getty Images

Whether you're gearing up to send your first child off to kindergarten or have preteens headed to junior high, back-to-school time can be a bit hectic. Does everyone have all the supplies they need? Do those sneakers still fit? And can you possibly sneak in one more beach day/BBQ/family road trip before that first-day bell rings?

There's a lot on your mind so it's natural that a few things get lost in the shuffle. While some slip-ups aren't such a big deal (does anyone really care if you accidentally bought a blue folder instead of a red one?), others could have serious consequences. Top of your don't-forget-about-it list: Making sure your kids have the vaccines they need to attend school and stay healthy all year long.

Time it right

Before you panic about how you'll manage to get this done before Labor Day, you should know that your children might already have all the immunizations they need for this school year. That's very likely the case if you've been taking them to a pediatrician for regular checkups and your doctor has been following the vaccine schedule put out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

According to the CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), kids should be immunized against a slew of diseases long before they enter school. By age 5 (when kids typically enter kindergarten), your child should be partially or fully immunized against:

Hepatitis B (HepB)

Rotavirus

Diphtheria

Tetanus and pertussis (DTaP)

Haemophilus influenzae type b4 (Hib)

13 types of Pneumococcal Bacteria (PCV13)

Polio

Measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR)

Varicella (chickenpox)

Hepatitis A (HepA)

Your child should also get a flu vaccine annually. Some parents worry that this is an awful lot of shots to get in a short period, especially since many of these (per the CDC and AAP guidelines) are supposed to be given during the first two years of life. But getting your kids vaccinated is one of the best things you can do for their health, says Valerie Cohen, DO, a pediatrician at Northwell Health and assistant professor at the Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell.

"Scientific data shows that getting several vaccines at the same time is completely safe and does not cause any chronic health problems," she says. "The risk of not immunizing your child is much greater than the risks from the vaccines." The most common side effects of vaccines are pain or redness at the injection site, fever or irritability. Vaccines are one of the most well-studied and well-researched aspects of medicine."

Must-haves for kindergarten

If your child is about to start school for the first time and you haven't been following the AAP's recommended schedule (https://www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/immunization_schedule2018.pdf), talk to your doctor about how to catch up. To enter public school as a kindergartner, children in all 50 states must be vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis; polio; measles and rubella; and chickenpox. Individual states may have additional requirements: In New York (<https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/2370.pdf>), for example, incoming kindergartners must also be protected against mumps, HepB, and Hib.

Just how serious are these vaccine-preventable diseases? Diphtheria is a respiratory infection that was often fatal before the vaccine against it was introduced. Tetanus (https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/services-we-offer/infectious-disease/conditions/tetanus?utm_medium=in_body_link&utm_source=the_well&utm_campaign=the_well&utm_content=thewell_wi_va) is caused by bacteria that's found in soil and dust, and if it gets into an open wound it can lead to painful vocal cord spasms, pneumonia, and sometimes death. HepA (https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/conditions-we-treat/hepatitis-a?utm_medium=in_body_link&utm_source=the_well&utm_campaign=the_well&utm_content=thewell_wi_va) is a serious liver disease, and Hib (https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/conditions-we-treat/hepatitis-b?utm_medium=in_body_link&utm_source=the_well&utm_campaign=the_well&utm_content=thewell_wi_va) can cause meningitis (https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/services-we-offer/infectious-disease/conditions/bacterial-meningitis?utm_medium=in_body_link&utm_source=the_well&utm_campaign=the_well&utm_content=thewell_wi_va) (infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord) in children.

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a respiratory infection that makes it hard to breathe. It's particularly dangerous for babies. There are still semi-frequent outbreaks (<https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/outbreaks/faqs.html>) in the U.S., which usually occur when a cluster of people decide to forgo vaccination. There have been recent outbreaks of measles (<https://www.cdc.gov/measles/cases-outbreaks.html>) and mumps (<https://www.cdc.gov/mumps/outbreaks.html>) in this country, too. Dr. Cohen notes, "The immunity from certain vaccines wanes over time, which is why it is so important to be aware of and get your booster shots, as well."

Rubella (German measles) causes miscarriage or serious birth defects (<https://www.cdc.gov/rubella/about/in-the-us.html>), but thankfully the vaccine has virtually wiped it out in the U.S. Polio has been eradicated here as well. But that doesn't mean you can skip these shots: "If someone with polio comes to the United States, you would be in danger of contracting it if you hadn't gotten the vaccine," says Dr. Cohen.

“Getting your kids vaccinated is one of the best things you can do for their health.”

Dr. Valerie Cohen, pediatrician

For the preteen crowd

If your children are a bit older, you may assume that they already had all their required vaccinations years ago, but that's not true. The CDC recommends that kids get the first dose of the meningococcal (meningitis) vaccine at age 11 or 12, along with booster shot for tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (TDap).

If you live in New York state, your child is required to have had at least one dose of meningococcal vaccine before entering 7th grade (<https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/2370.pdf>); the second dose is required before 12th grade. People age 15 to 21 have the greatest risk (<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Meningococcal-Disease-Information-for-Teens-and-College-Students-.aspx>) of meningitis, which is why it makes sense to protect your kids at this time.

Although not a requirement to attend public school, the CDC also recommends that both girls and boys get the first dose of the HPV vaccine at age 11 or 12 and that they complete the full series before age 13 (<https://www.cdc.gov/features/back-to-school-vaccines/index.html>). Most health experts suggest that this vaccine be given before a person becomes sexually active, because HPV (human papillomavirus) is a common sexually transmitted disease that can lead to cervical cancer, penile cancer, and throat cancer, and genital warts. So while it is suggested to get the series prior to the onset of sexual activity, the vaccine still works on individuals who are sexually active and is approved for everyone up to age 26.

If you've heard that the HPV vaccine is dangerous or will spur risky behavior, feel free to discuss your concerns with your doctor—but know that most of the supposed harms out there have been debunked (<https://www.snopes.com/news/2017/06/08/gardasil-vaccine/>). "It's a vaccine that prevents cancer," says Dr. Cohen, “Who wouldn't want that?”

Next Steps and Useful Resources:

Meet with Dr. Valerie Cohen, pediatrician ([https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/find-a-doctor/pediatrics/dr-valerie-cohen-do-11372331?](https://www.northwell.edu/find-care/find-a-doctor/pediatrics/dr-valerie-cohen-do-11372331?utm_medium=next_steps_link&utm_source=the_well&utm_campaign=the_well&utm_content=thewell)

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Is thinking about the HPV vaccine causing you S-T-R-E-S-S?

([https://thewell.northwell.edu/potpourri-and/birds-bees-and-hpv?](https://thewell.northwell.edu/potpourri-and/birds-bees-and-hpv?utm_medium=next_steps_link&utm_source=the_well&utm_campaign=the_well&utm_content=thewell)

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not alone.

Read about The Power of Prevention ([https://www.northwell.edu/about/news/publications/kids-first/winter-2016/the-power-of-prevention-?](https://www.northwell.edu/about/news/publications/kids-first/winter-2016/the-power-of-prevention-?utm_medium=next_steps_link&utm_source=the_well&utm_campaign=the_well&utm_content=thewell)

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