



## The Importance of Childhood Immunizations

### Disease Prevention--Protect Those Around You

Disease prevention is the key to public health. It is always better to prevent a disease than to treat it. Vaccines prevent disease in the people who receive them and protect those who come into contact with unvaccinated individuals. Vaccines help prevent infectious diseases and save lives. Vaccines are responsible for the control of many infectious diseases that were once common in this country, including polio, measles, diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), rubella (German measles), mumps, tetanus, and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib).

Parents are constantly concerned about the health and safety of their children and take many steps to protect them. These steps range from child-proof door latches to child safety seats. In the same way, vaccines work to protect infants, children, and adults from illnesses and death caused by infectious diseases. While the U.S. currently has record, or near record, low cases of vaccine-preventable diseases, the viruses and bacteria that cause them still exist. Even diseases that have been eliminated in this country, such as polio, are only a plane ride away. Polio, and other infectious diseases, can be passed on to people who are not protected by vaccines.

### Why are Childhood Vaccines So Important?

Vaccine-preventable diseases have a costly impact, resulting in doctor's visits, hospitalizations, and premature deaths. Sick children can also cause parents to lose time from work.

- It's true that newborn babies are immune to many diseases because they have antibodies they got from their mothers. However, the duration of this immunity may last only a month to about a year. Further, young children do not have maternal immunity against some vaccine-preventable diseases, such as whooping cough.
- If a child is not vaccinated and is exposed to a disease germ, the child's body may not be strong enough to fight the disease. Before vaccines, many children died from diseases that vaccines now prevent, such as whooping cough, measles, and polio. Those same germs exist today, but babies are now protected by vaccines, so we do not see these diseases as often.
- Immunizing individual children also helps to protect the health of our community, especially those people who are not immunized. People who are not immunized include those who are too young to be vaccinated (e.g., children less than a year old cannot receive the measles vaccine but can be infected by the measles virus), those who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons (e.g., children with leukemia), and those who cannot make an adequate response to vaccination. Also protected, therefore, are people who received a vaccine, but who have not developed immunity. In addition, people who are sick will be less likely to be exposed to disease germs that can be passed around by unvaccinated children. Immunization also slows down or stops disease outbreaks.