

Childhood Vaccinations: Protecting Our Children and Community

As a GP in London, I often speak with parents and carers about the importance of childhood vaccinations. With so much information (and sometimes misinformation) circulating, it's completely understandable to have questions or concerns. But one thing remains clear from decades of medical research and experience: vaccinations are one of the safest and most effective ways we have to protect our children—and our wider community—from serious and potentially life-threatening illnesses.

Why Are Childhood Vaccines So Important?

Vaccines help prepare a child's immune system to fight diseases. They work by introducing a small, harmless part of the disease (such as a protein or weakened virus) so the body can learn to recognise and fight it if exposed in the future. This helps prevent illness before it ever starts.

In the UK, our routine childhood immunisation schedule is carefully designed and regularly reviewed by experts at the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). It's based on the latest scientific evidence and aims to protect children at the ages when they are most vulnerable.

What Illnesses Do We Vaccinate Against?

Thanks to the NHS vaccination programme, children in the UK are protected against illnesses such as:

Measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) – which can lead to complications like meningitis, deafness, or even death.

Polio – once a global threat, now nearly eradicated thanks to vaccines. It attacks the nervous system and can cause brain inflammation and paralysis.

Diphtheria, tetanus, and whooping cough (pertussis) – all potentially serious infections that can be fatal.

Meningitis and pneumonia – caused by various bacteria, including meningococcal and pneumococcal strains.

HPV (human papillomavirus) – offered to both boys and girls in secondary school to protect against cancers later in life.

Chicken Pox – will be added to the programme from January 2026 to be given alongside MMR and will help protect against possible complications of chicken pox such as lung inflammation.

These vaccines don't just protect the individual child—they contribute to **herd immunity**, which helps shield those who can't be vaccinated, such as babies, people with certain health conditions, or those undergoing cancer treatment.

Are Vaccines Safe?

Yes. Vaccines used in the UK go through rigorous safety testing before being approved and are continually monitored for side effects. Serious side effects are extremely rare. For most children, any reactions—like a sore arm, mild fever, or tiredness—are mild and short-lived compared to the potentially severe consequences of the diseases themselves.

Addressing Common Concerns

As GPs, we understand that some parents worry about vaccine safety or the number of vaccines given at a young age. It's important to know that the schedule is carefully balanced, and the immune system can handle far more than the number of vaccines given.

If you're ever unsure, we encourage you to speak with your GP or practice nurse. We're here to support you with accurate, evidence-based advice, not judgement.

Staying on Schedule

Vaccines work best when given at the right time. If your child has missed a vaccine—for example, due to illness or a move—it's not too late. We can help catch them up. Your local surgery or health visitor can provide guidance, and you can always check your child's **Red Book** (personal child health record) to see what they've had and what's due.

Final Thoughts

Vaccinating your child is one of the most important decisions you can make for their long-term health. It's a simple act that protects not just your child, but your family, friends, and neighbours. In a city as diverse and connected as London, that shared protection is more vital than ever.

If you have any concerns or would like to know more about vaccines, please don't hesitate to get in touch with your local GP practice. We're here to help.

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