

Hot Topic: Vaccines and Autism

Since there's been so much media coverage lately about the potential link between immunizations and autism, we asked *Parents* advisor Ari Brown, M.D., author of *Baby 411*, why the pediatric community strongly believes that vaccines are not to blame.

Q How do we know that vaccines are safe?

A Last year alone, vaccines prevented a potential 14 million infections and 33,000 deaths in the United States. Each new vaccine is studied extensively before it's approved for use,

both separately and in combination with other vaccines that are given at the same time. And they continue to be studied even after they're approved.

Q Does mercury in vaccines cause autism?

A Thimerosal, a mercury-based preservative, is the main ingredient that gets blamed for autism, but it was removed from vaccines in 2001 and autism rates have continued to rise. Some flu shots still contain thimerosal preservatives, but you can ask your doctor for a thimerosal-free version. The truth is that a baby typically is exposed to 25 times more mercury by breastfeeding for six months—which the AAP strongly recommends—than by getting a flu shot. There is five times more mercury in a single tuna-fish sandwich. Methyl mercury, found in fish, takes almost two months to break down and leave the body. Thimerosal, which is ethyl mercury, is rapidly eliminated—within a week.

Q What about the combination MMR vaccine—hasn't that been linked to autism?

A The MMR vaccine made news in 1998 when a research group claimed, after studying eight autistic patients, that the combination vaccine might cause autism. But in 2004, ten of the 13 researchers withdrew their claims, and extensive research since then has also refuted this theory. Perhaps the most compelling argument against it is that doctors



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in Japan stopped using the combination MMR vaccine back in 1993 and started using separate measles, mumps, and rubella shots—and autism rates there are still climbing.

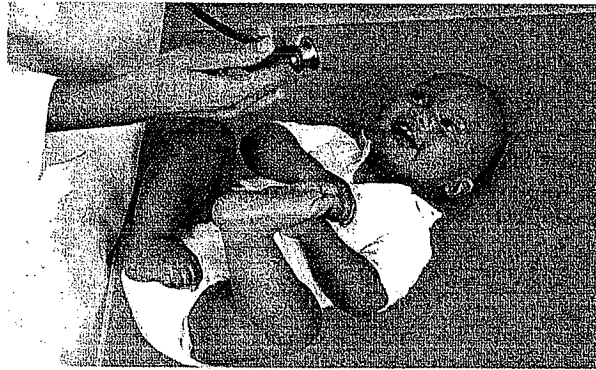
Q How can I be sure that all of these vaccines aren't overloading my baby's immune system?

A Your infant is already exposed to thousands of germs on a daily basis (whether or not he's in child care). Even if your baby got 11 shots at the same time, he would need to use only about 0.1 percent of his immune system to respond. The goal is to protect your child as quickly as possible from diseases that young children are most vulnerable to. Even though the number of shots has gone up over the years, the load on a baby's immune system has actually gone down thanks to refinements in the number of specific antigens in vaccines.

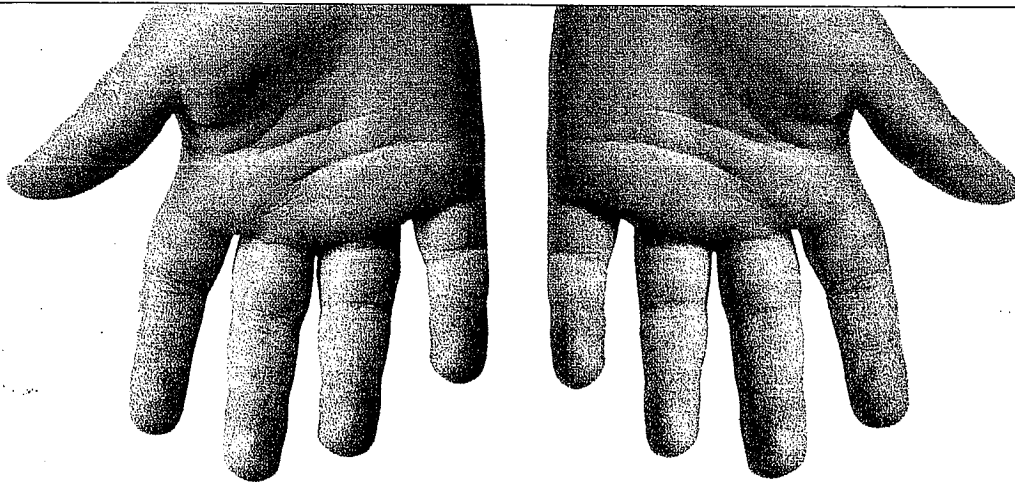
Q But didn't a vaccine court recently decide that immunization caused one child's autism?

A This was a unique case. The National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program has been holding special hearings called the Omnibus Autism Proceedings. This "Vaccine Court" is looking at allegations that thousands of children developed autism from vaccines, taking on a few cases at first to form opinions about

the evidence. So far, one child, Hannah Poling, was awarded a monetary settlement, but the court did not concede that vaccines cause autism. Turns out Hannah was born with a rare mitochondrial disorder—a disease affecting the energy producers in her cells—and the court ruled that the stress of immunizations may have aggravated her condition, leading to autism-like symptoms. However, any stress from a fever or dehydration, for instance, can cause deterioration for a child like her. If she had gotten a vaccine-preventable disease like the flu or chicken pox, she could have suffered far worse health consequences. Experts recommend that these children, especially, get vaccinated. ☆



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