

GP's notebook: the MMR jab

Mum-of-three Dr Dawn Harper gives her personal and professional opinion on the vaccine that worries parents most



Soon after your baby celebrates his first birthday you will receive an invitation to take him along to your GP's surgery for the first of two jabs to protect him from measles, mumps and rubella (MMR). The first injection is given at 13 months and the second before starting school (between three and five years old).

HOT TOPIC

The MMR jab probably causes more concern among parents than any other vaccination. It is easy to see why when you consider all the column inches written in recent years about there being a possible link between the single MMR vaccine and autism and bowel disease. I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight for you.

As a GP and a mum I have had a vested interest in looking at all the research. I have been lucky enough to talk in person to Dr Andrew Wakefield, the lead author of the study that raised the initial concerns in 1998. Dr Wakefield says his research *never proved* any link between autism,

Crohn's Disease and the single vaccine. But it did raise questions.

THE GOOD NEWS

One good thing to come from MMR being thrust into the spotlight is that several further studies were carried out. The good news is that the evidence doesn't support any link between autism and inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's) and MMR*.

Over 500 million doses of MMR have been given worldwide and it's not just the government's Department of Health that is pro

to become complacent about measles, mumps and rubella since the vaccination programme has meant they have become much less common in this country. However, I have seen a rise in cases in recent years as more parents opt to decline the MMR and leave their children vulnerable to infection.

You only have to meet one child born deaf, blind and mentally handicapped as a result of congenital rubella syndrome to be reminded of just how tragic these illnesses can be. All three of

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the MMR. The World Health Organization strongly endorses the use of the single vaccine on the grounds that it is not only a highly effective vaccine but also has an outstanding safety record.

SAFETY FIRST

The bottom line for me is that there is no proven link – the MMR vaccine is safe, but let's not forget that the three diseases it protects against are not. It is easy

my children had both doses of MMR and I would make the same decision again today. ■



CATCHING MEASLES WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Most children who catch measles simply develop the symptoms of a cold, plus small spots inside the mouth and a temperature. These first symptoms are followed by a red rash which starts behind the ears and moves over the rest of the body within a few days. With TLC and regular paracetamol, your child should be better within a week. However, measles can be a serious disease when complications occur. Around one in 200 cases suffers from fits and one in 1,000 develops encephalitis or meningitis (inflammation of the brain or its covering) which can cause brain damage. One in 5,000 cases of measles is fatal.

CATCHING MUMPS WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

After contracting the mumps virus it can be up to three weeks before the symptoms develop: a fever and swollen glands around

the jaw. Most children get better within a week to 10 days. However, the older the child is when he catches mumps, the more likely he is to develop complications, such as meningitis or swelling and inflammation of the testicles (in boys) and ovaries (in girls). One in 25 will develop deafness and some never completely recover from the illness.

CATCHING RUBELLA (GERMAN MEASLES): WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

After contracting the German measles virus it can take up to three weeks for the classic symptoms to present: a mild flu-like illness followed by a pink rash, which spreads from the face and ears to the rest of the body in a few hours. Most cases recover quickly, but one in 6,000 develops encephalitis. If a woman is infected during early pregnancy (before 16 weeks) the baby may be severely brain damaged and could be born with hearing, sight or heart problems.

MMR ARE THERE SINGLE VACCINES?

There has been a lot of interest in single MMR jabs, with parents asking if their children can be vaccinated against measles, mumps and rubella using three separate injections. Single vaccines are not licensed in the UK and no country in the world recommends them. There is an argument that giving individual jabs puts children at increased risk of developing measles, mumps or rubella in the gaps between the vaccines.



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* Suitable from three months (weighing over 5kg)