Measles, mumps, rubella and the MMR vaccine

Here are some facts about measles, mumps, rubella and the MMR vaccine.

- The MMR programme started in Britain in 1988. By this time, children in the United States had been having the MMR vaccine for over 15 years with no safety problems.

- Worldwide, more than 500 million doses of the MMR vaccine have been given in over 100 countries.

- The World Health Organization says about the MMR vaccine, 'its safety record is exemplary'.

- In the year before the vaccine was introduced in the UK, 86,000 children caught measles and 16 died.

- Because of the MMR vaccine, no child has died from acute measles in the UK since 1992.

- Before the vaccine was introduced, mumps was the commonest cause of viral meningitis in children.

- Because of the MMR vaccine, we are now close to wiping out mumps in children.

- Before the MMR vaccine was introduced, rubella continued to cause terrible damage to some unborn babies.

- Because of the MMR vaccine, we are now close to wiping out rubella.

- There has never been a programme of giving single vaccines against measles, mumps and rubella in the UK.
We keep hearing that the MMR vaccine is linked with autism. Is this true?

No. This leaflet will give you the facts.

So why has MMR been linked with autism?

The speculation over a link between the MMR vaccine and autism started in 1998 when some scientists published a paper on 12 autistic children who also had bowel problems. Although the scientists stated clearly that there was no proven link between autism and the MMR vaccine, the resulting publicity gave the impression that there was a link.

The number of children being diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders (conditions related to autism) has been increasing for many years. Some people took this as an indication that the increase was caused by the MMR vaccine.

Many parents of autistic children know that there is something different about their child very early on. But some babies may appear to develop signs of autism when they are older. This type of autism, called regressive autism, was known about long before the MMR vaccine was introduced. Symptoms of regressive autism often start around the same time that the first dose of the MMR vaccine is given. So it's understandable that parents worry about there being a connection between the two events.

How can we tell if there is a link?

If the MMR vaccine and autism were linked, regressive autism would be far more common in vaccinated children than in unvaccinated ones. But this is not the case.
If the MMR vaccine caused autism, there would have been a sudden increase in cases when the vaccine was introduced into Britain. This didn't happen. You would also expect to see a fall in cases of autism if the MMR vaccine was withdrawn. In Japan, that didn't happen when they stopped using the MMR vaccine and used a single measles and a single rubella vaccine instead.

Extensive research into the possibility of a link between the MMR vaccine and autism, involving hundreds of thousands of children, has been carried out in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the USA and the UK. No link has been found.

Experts from around the world, including the World Health Organization, agree that there is no link between the MMR vaccine and autism.

Was there a sudden increase in autism after the MMR vaccine was introduced?

No. There has been no sudden increase in autism in any country after the MMR vaccine was introduced. This wouldn't be the case if the MMR vaccine caused autism.

So what might be the real cause of autism?

Autistic spectrum disorders probably result from a range of causes. The strongest evidence to date points to there being a genetic link.

The chances of a child developing autism are no different if they have the combined MMR vaccine, single measles, single mumps and single rubella vaccines, or no vaccines at all.

All the latest research shows that there is no evidence to say that the MMR vaccine causes autism. Work continues to find out what the real causes are.
Why can’t my child have single vaccines?

- All the evidence shows that the MMR vaccine is the safest way to protect your child against measles, mumps and rubella.
- In the time gaps between the three vaccines, children would not be protected against the diseases they had not yet been immunised against. So there would be an increase in measles, mumps and rubella leading to illness and possible death. Also, unprotected children can pass on these diseases to other at risk children and pregnant women.
- Choice is important, but the NHS cannot offer a choice of single vaccines that would put children at risk.
- Not everybody will be able to finish the course of six injections (initial dose and second dose) and so some children will be left unprotected.
- The World Health Organization advises against using separate vaccines because they would leave children at risk for no benefit. No other country in the world recommends that children should be immunised against measles, mumps and rubella in three separate vaccines, twice over.

But what about overloading my child’s immune system with three viruses all at once?

From birth, babies’ immune systems protect them from the germs that surround them. Without this protection, babies would not be able to cope with the tens of thousands of bacteria and viruses that cover their skin, nose, throat and intestines. This protection carries on throughout the child’s life.

A baby could respond safely and effectively to around 10,000 vaccines at any one time. So the baby’s immune system can and does easily cope with the MMR vaccine.
Measles

What is measles?

Measles is caused by a very infectious virus. Nearly everyone who catches it will have a high fever, a rash and be unwell. Children have to spend about five days in bed and may be off school for ten days. Adults are likely to be ill for longer. It is not possible to tell who will be seriously affected by measles. The complications of measles affect one in every 15 children. Complications include chest infections, fits, encephalitis (swelling of the brain) and brain damage. In very serious cases, measles kills.

How is it spread?

Measles is one of the most infectious diseases known. A cough or a sneeze can spread the measles virus over a wide area. Because it's so infectious, the chances are your child will get measles if he or she is not protected.

Mumps

What is mumps?

Mumps is caused by a virus which causes a fever, a headache, and painful, swollen glands in the face, neck and jaw. It can result in permanent deafness, viral meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain) and encephalitis. Rarely, it causes painful swelling of the testicles in males and the ovaries in females. Mumps lasts about seven to ten days.

How is it spread?

Mumps is spread in the same way as measles. It is about as infectious as flu.
Rubella

What is rubella?

Rubella (German measles) is a disease caused by a virus. In children it is usually mild and may go unnoticed. It causes a short-lived rash, swollen glands and a sore throat. Rubella is very serious for unborn babies. It can seriously damage their sight, hearing, heart and brain. Rubella infection in the first three months of pregnancy causes damage to the unborn baby in up to nine out of ten cases. This condition is called congenital rubella syndrome (CRS). In many cases, pregnant women catch rubella from their own, or their friends’, children.

How is it spread?

Rubella is spread in the same way as measles and mumps. It is about as infectious as flu.