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## Protect for life

POSITIVE PARENTING  
By DATUK DR ZULKIFLI ISMAIL

**No other health prevention effort has prevented deaths and disability to the extent that childhood immunisation has.**

BEFORE the age of modern medicine, infectious outbreaks were common and often resulted in death or disability. People lived in unsanitary conditions, where germs spread easily. No one knew how to prevent, much less treat these diseases.

Today, in addition to effective antibiotics, we have the advantage of vaccines, a scientific discovery that has saved millions of lives. Yet, some parents remain sceptical, leaving their children to pay the deadly price.

### Defending against diseases

Your child's body is designed to produce cells and antibodies that can combat viruses and bacteria. An attack by these viruses or bacteria will produce a complex immunological "memory", which is what gives your child immunity against future invasions by the same germs.

However, there are certain types of germs that the body cannot protect itself against, without the help of vaccines. These germs include bacteria that cause tuberculosis (TB), diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus and meningitis, as well as viruses that cause hepatitis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella and chickenpox.

Without vaccination, these germs could wreak havoc on your child's body, causing disability, even death.

### Have your child vaccinated

There are currently six types of vaccines recommended by the Ministry of Health Malaysia to protect your child. Your child will receive his first vaccination at birth, and should continue receiving all the other doses of these vaccines, following the recommended schedule (please see table).

The latest addition to the schedule, Haemophilus Influenza type b (Hib), introduced in 2002, should prevent severe diseases like pneumonia and meningitis caused by this bacteria.

Apart from the mandatory vaccines, optional vaccines are also available to protect him against other diseases, such as chickenpox, hepatitis A, Japanese encephalitis (JE), typhoid, and influenza.

There are also vaccines against specific organisms like the pneumococcus (a bacteria) and rotavirus (a virus that cause diarrhoea). In addition, cancer-preventing vaccines like human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine for young adults are now making their mark.

### What's stopping you?

There are some parents who do not take their children for vaccinations. Some hold fast to misconceptions, while others merely make excuses.

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The Malaysian Paediatric Association (MPA) takes a look at some of the common beliefs.

Belief #1: "These diseases don't even occur anymore."

Fact: Bacteria and viruses have survived alongside generations of humans. Some of these germs prevail in less than hygienic conditions, which still exist in Malaysia.

Your child is still at risk of contracting these infectious diseases from other people and from the environment. Tuberculosis or TB is seeing a resurgence brought in mainly by migrant workers, polio was brought to West Java, Indonesia, from Nigeria via Yemen and Saudi Arabia in 2005, and we still have sporadic measles outbreaks.

Belief #2: "Vaccination is not safe."

Fact: Cases of serious adverse effects associated with vaccinations are extremely rare. Vaccination may cause mild reactions or side-effects to some children. On the other hand, an infection would be devastating to your child, as well as costly to treat.

The benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks and temporary discomforts that may arise. The usual post-vaccination problems are redness and swelling at the injection site and fever.

Belief #3: "Why vaccinate when doctor can treat?"

Fact: There is currently no effective or specific treatment for many of these diseases. There are hardly any drugs to successfully combat the viral diseases. When complications arise, there is little left except to put the children on supportive treatment that can be unpleasant and expensive. Antibiotics are administered for bacterial infections, but antibiotic resistance is making them less potent.

At times, treatment may not be able to prevent severe complications (like heart or brain damage, or muscular paralysis) from occurring. Other times, treatment may be too late because diagnosis and appropriate treatment may be delayed.

Belief #4: "My child has a cold."

Fact: A mild runny nose is not a contraindication to vaccination. If the child has a fever, it may be wise to defer the vaccine. Oral polio vaccine, which is being phased out in lieu of the injectable vaccine, may be given later if baby has diarrhoea.

Belief #5: "I don't have time!"

Fact: All it requires is a trip to the clinic/hospital every month or two for the first few months of the baby's life. Your employers and colleagues will understand if you need to take time off. Your child's health and life is a priority.

*This article is courtesy of the Malaysian Paediatric Association for the Positive Parenting Programme. For further information, please visit [www.mypositiveparenting.org](http://www.mypositiveparenting.org)*

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