

# Immunize: Protect against disease

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## A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

Many people are hoping for a vaccine that can protect us against COVID-19, or at least find a current antiviral medication for effective treatment. As of this writing, there is neither a preventative vaccine nor a cure for those infected.

In times like these, it helps to remember past disease outbreaks that caused widespread fear and even panic. One in recent memory was the polio epidemic in the early 1950s, which recorded more than 15,000 cases of paralysis a year in the United States ([www.cdc.gov/polio/what-is-polio/polio-us.html](http://www.cdc.gov/polio/what-is-polio/polio-us.html)).

For an appreciation of how polio affected children and adults, talk with someone who lived during that decade or to someone who contracted the disease and survived. Be sure to ask about the relief that people felt when a polio vaccine was introduced. The subsequent vaccination program has enabled the United States to be free of this crippling disease since 1979 ([www.cdc.gov/polio/what-is-polio/polio-us.html](http://www.cdc.gov/polio/what-is-polio/polio-us.html)).

Vaccines have prevented other disease outbreaks—namely, typhoid fever, diphtheria, and smallpox—in the first half of the 20th century in United States. As a result, vaccines have spared untold numbers of children and their family members from these diseases and saved millions of lives.

But two diseases—whooping cough (pertussis) and measles—that were nearly eradicated have resurfaced. Both can cause serious and sometimes deadly complications, such as pneumonia in babies and young children and may require hospitalization ([www.cdc.gov/measles/cases-outbreaks.html](http://www.cdc.gov/measles/cases-outbreaks.html)).

### Why vaccinate?

The obvious answer is to protect our children from suffering and even death. Don't be mistaken in thinking you can keep your children away from people with a disease. Some people are disease carriers

but don't display symptoms.

A practical reason for vaccination is that sick children can cause families to incur high doctor and hospitalization costs. Without a back-up plan for child care, parents use up sick leave and miss responsibilities at work.

Furthermore, when all, or almost all, of us get vaccinated, the result is *herd immunity*. As fewer people get sick, infection rates decline, and ultimately the disease-causing virus or bacteria has no place to go ([www.webmd.com/lung/what-is-herd-immunity#1](http://www.webmd.com/lung/what-is-herd-immunity#1)).

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## SEPARATE FACT FROM FICTION.

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Occasionally misinformation passed by word-of-mouth or the Internet causes parents to express concerns about the safety of vaccines. To address these concerns, two public agencies—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Federal Drug Administration—closely monitor vaccines through several safety systems.

Moreover, agencies like these help you separate fact from fiction. For example, several studies have shown no evidence for the notion that the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine is linked to autism. A leading British medical journal, the BMJ, has declared that idea “an elaborate fraud” ([www.webmd.com/brain/autism/news/20110106/bmj-declares-vaccine-autism-study-fraud#](http://www.webmd.com/brain/autism/news/20110106/bmj-declares-vaccine-autism-study-fraud#) and [www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism.html)).

As a responsible parent, you will do the following:

- Get your baby vaccinated according to the schedule

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your doctor or health provider recommends. The schedule can be found on the CDC website at [www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/schedules/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/schedules/index.html).

- Inform your child's early childhood program or school about your child's vaccination status.
- Inquire about the vaccination status of your children's playmates.
- Review the CDC website before traveling out of the United States about the possible need for boosters or additional shots.

If you're unable to pay for vaccinations, talk to your doctor or health care provider. The federal government operates the Vaccines for Children program that provides vaccines at no cost to eligible families ([www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/vfc/about/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/vfc/about/index.html)).

As we have learned since the COVID-19 pandemic began, good health is a treasure. More than 2,000 years ago, the Roman poet Virgil said, "The greatest wealth is health." ■

# How might the pandemic change us?

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COVID-19 has shaken the planet, causing schools to close, hospitals to get overloaded, workers to lose their jobs, and, worst of all, people to die. In the midst of all the downsides, could there be upsides as well? Not just more business for online companies but positive changes for everyday people?

Consider the following:

### **Spending more time with our children.**

Shelter-in-place, which can be challenging especially for single moms, has created opportunities for play and learning. If you've walked your neighborhood, have you seen more dads playing catch with a son or daughter, something they didn't have time for before?

**More learning online.** Children will still need one-on-one guidance from teachers and limits on screen time, but online, self-paced programs are worth exploring. And certainly many adults have taken advantage of webinars, but some professional workshops and training will go online.

**Fewer and better meetings.** Zoom and similar formats have enabled us to continue meeting with colleagues and others. Can such online meetings replace some gatherings that we held routinely and challenge us to improve meetings by having a clear agenda and sticking to it?

**Greater friendliness and connection with neighbors.** Have you observed, while in your car or walking outdoors (masked and with 6 feet of social distance), that the people you pass are more likely to give you the right of way and to smile and wave?

**Cleaner environment.** Less traffic and factory shutdowns have reduced air pollution and provided relief for people with asthma, especially children. Can we continue these improvements somehow?

**Rethinking our habits and schedules.** Do we really need the stuff we buy, the time we spend watching TV, the car trips we make? Which changes—like playing the guitar, reading, and exercising—do we want to continue?

**Improving hygiene and cleanliness.** Handwashing and face masks have reminded us how easily germs can spread. Will we continue to wash our hands, cough and sneeze into a tissue or elbow, and carry out and teach other practices to protect ourselves and others?

**Showing more kindness.** The pandemic has stimulated acts of kindness—providing food to low-income families, giving away hand-sewn face masks, giving bigger tips when buying to-go foods and products—as well as anger, hostility, and insensitivity. After the pandemic, will we be kinder to everyone—friends, family, customers? Will we start or engage in efforts to overcome inequities?

The choices are ours, both individually and in our groups. It's not about looking at our work and life as a Pollyanna, but rather looking realistically at opportunities, resources, trends, and attitudes. ■

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



# Beware of these baby hazards

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The American Academy of Pediatrics warns parents to avoid two items commonly used with babies: baby powder and walkers.

### Why not baby powder?

Sprinkling baby powder on a baby as part of diapering or after bathing can result in babies breathing in the tiny particles, which can cause respiratory problems and serious lung damage. Actually the powder—as well as most lotions and oils—are unnecessary (<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/68/2/265>).

Consumer products manufacturer Johnson & Johnson discontinued selling talc-based baby powder in early February because of consumer concerns about a possible link to cancer. The suspected carcinogen is talc, a soft mineral, which in its natural form contains asbestos ([www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/talcum-powder-and-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/talcum-powder-and-cancer.html)).

The American Cancer Society says that research results linking baby powder to cancer has been unclear. The International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of the World Health Organization, has classified talc containing asbestos as “carcinogenic to humans,” and any genital use of body powder as “possibly carcinogenic” ([www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2020/02/05/baby-powder-safe-use-does-cause-cancer-questions-answered/4657693002/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2020/02/05/baby-powder-safe-use-does-cause-cancer-questions-answered/4657693002/)).

### Why not a walker?

Many parents think walkers will help their children learn to walk. But the Academy says that’s not true. Babies can move so fast in walkers that they can

- roll down the stairs or off a porch, which can result in injury, especially the head,
- reach higher to places ordinarily inaccessible such as a hot stove or a cabinet with dangerous chemicals, and

- drown in a swimming pool.

For more details see [www.aappublications.org/news/2018/09/17/babywalkers091718](http://www.aappublications.org/news/2018/09/17/babywalkers091718).

Besides these hazards, walkers can delay phases of normal motor development such as crawling and standing (<https://consults.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/22/the-dangers-of-baby-walkers/>). The Academy has called for a ban on the manufacture and sale of walkers with wheels. Canada banned walkers in 2004. ■