Children Still Need Regular Vaccinations, Even During a Pandemic

Reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveal an alarming trend that’s developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children in the U.S. aren’t going to the pediatrician as they typically do. As a result, far too many are skipping vaccinations for preventable diseases.

Many parents plan to resume their child’s routine vaccinations once the virus is no longer considered a serious risk, and stay-home orders have been lifted. But, doctors warn that this delay could cause a spike in infection rates among children, which can also spread to adults.

“This is a very real risk, not just 6 to 12 months from now, but now,” says Judith Schaechter M.D., chair of pediatrics at the University of Miami Health System. “Most experts agree that COVID-19 will be with us for at least a year, maybe far more. We can’t afford to risk children’s lives by postponing vaccines during this period.”

If your family is practicing physical distancing, why does your child need to be vaccinated now?

“Children who are behind on their vaccines, or worse, unvaccinated, have immune systems that are not prepared to resist infection. Even if they are around family members who received vaccines themselves, the immune response in those family members may have waned over time. So, they could potentially pass infections to
their young children,” Dr. Schaechter said.

“This is exactly how the measles epidemic of the last several years has occurred. Only now, it is a larger proportion of young children who are unvaccinated, and they are missing vaccines for diseases including measles, pneumococcus, Haemophilus Influenzae B, chickenpox, and mumps.”

Being “safe at home” during the pandemic means every member of your household is fully vaccinated against these preventable diseases. This will help children remain healthy and avoid hospitalization.

**What about the risk of catching the coronavirus during a routine visit to the pediatrician’s office?**

The [American Academy of Pediatrics](https://www.aap.org/en-us) and the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) are urging all parents to not delay in-person visits with their pediatrician out of fear of COVID-19, especially for children aged 24 months and younger.

“Coronavirus is concerning, but it is not the only concern,” Dr. Schaechter said. “Vaccination is always about benefit over risk of harm.”

During this pandemic, pediatricians are continuing to safely see and treat young children. Healthcare professionals take necessary precautions like wearing appropriate protective gear, disinfecting surfaces, and practicing physical distancing as much as possible. “We are also keeping families separated from one another, reducing the number of office visits, avoiding waiting rooms, and using physical barriers to protect staff and families. All of this is being done to keep children safe.”

Based on the [data](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/overview/children.html), children are already considered a low-risk population for coronavirus infection. “Children represent a very small number of coronavirus patients, and an even smaller percentage of children who become infected are
hospitalized due to the virus,” Dr. Schaechter said.

**How can you protect your child from getting infected when visiting the pediatrician?**

While at the doctor's office, Dr. Schaechter emphasizes the following precautions:

- Wherever possible, keep six feet away from persons outside of your household.
- Keep hands clean with soap and water or hand sanitizer.
- If doorknobs and other contact points are touched, use a paper towel or sanitize hands after touching.
- Adults and children over age two should properly wear masks when out of the house.
- To avoid unintended suffocation or choking, children younger than two should not wear face masks.
- For extra protection, a child under two can get to the office in a stroller with a covering draped over it.

**What do pediatricians want parents to understand?**

“Vaccine-preventable diseases will not wait for the government to lift the stay-home directive,” Dr. Schaechter said. “Diseases such as measles will look for opportunities to strike in a community, and now may be the chance. So, our prevention efforts cannot take a break.”

She added, “You would never think that a car ride is safe for your child without a seatbelt or a bike ride without a helmet.” Routine vaccines offer your child, your family, and everyone you encounter even higher levels of protection.
Dana Kantrowitz is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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