

# Words for Wellness

By Lisa Wehe, RN,MSN, FNP-BC



**Lisa Wehe**  
RN,MSN, FNP-BC

## Childhood vaccinations save lives

With the new school year well under way, many parents are familiar with the value of a checklist for items like school supplies and school clothes. Another thing to put on your list is immunizations.

The Texas Department of State Health Services requires all school children to be immunized, whether they attend public or private institutions. There are some exemptions allowed, mostly due to medical reasons that would impose a greater risk to the child, allergy to the vaccine, or because of religious beliefs. If a parent refuses to have a child immunized, an affidavit must be submitted to the state with an explanation and, except for religious reasons, there must be sufficient medical documentation to support the exemption.

Some of you may have noticed more required vaccines have been added to what was already a long list. A few years back, the government decided to add booster doses of Tetanus, Diphtheria and Pertussis (Tdap) and the meningococcal vaccine in order to reduce the spread of these illnesses. In addition, the Hepatitis A vaccine is now required for children entering kindergarten.

Gardasil is an optional vaccine that provides protection from certain high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV) that is sexually transmitted. The recommended age for this vaccine is age 9-26. There are a series of three vaccines that are spaced apart over a six-month period. Re-

cently, it has been approved for males also to decrease the spread of this virus. Risks from HPV include the possibility of genital warts and, for females, cervical cancer.

Frequently, parents come to the clinic with a lot of questions about the effectiveness and safety of vaccines for their children. My aim is to answer some of those questions and dispel some of the myths about vaccines. Although here in the United States most children are immunized, in other parts of the world active, potentially life-threatening diseases still exist. This poses a threat to our children because we now live in a "global community." For example, it only takes one infected child with the measles to trigger a widespread outbreak. As long as infectious diseases are circulating anywhere in the world, an unimmunized child is a risk.

The most common question asked is, "Will the vaccine make my child sick?" Any vaccine can cause side effects. The most common ones are low-grade fever, soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site. There are rare cases of allergic reactions or neurological symptoms such as seizures.

Another question asked is, "Does it place my child at risk to receive multiple vaccinations at the same time?" There is actually a greater risk in spacing or delaying vaccinations, as this places the child at risk to get the disease. Especially in the school setting, children are exposed to countless microbes daily. Vaccines work in a similar way as the body does when it comes into contact with a virus or bacteria. Through exposure to the vaccine, the body develops antibodies which help protect and pre-

vent the illness.

Another question I sometimes hear is, "Will the vaccines cause my child to become autistic?" There have been numerous studies over the past decade or so, and researchers have not found a conclusive link between autism and vaccinations. It has been speculated that there is a link between autism and thimerosal, a mercury-containing organic compound which was widely used as a preservative in a number of products, including vaccines. However, the Food and Drug Administration has found no link between the two, and thimerosal has been removed from or reduced to trace amounts in all vaccines routinely recommended for children six and younger, with the exception of inactivated influenza vaccine.

Autism has a strong genetic basis and is a complex disease. Additional information may be found at Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - www.cdc.gov - or the American Academy of Pediatrics website - www.aap.org.

The benefits of receiving vaccines are much greater than the costs of the diseases they prevent. In fact, in some cases those diseases can prove to be fatal. One of the most important things you can do to protect your children's health is to see that they receive all of the recommended immunizations. Schedule an appointment for your child, and remember to bring your child's immunization record. Together, we can partner to keep our children protected from these serious diseases.

*Lisa Wehe is a nurse practitioner at ETMC First Physicians Clinic in Fairfield. She can be reached at 903-389-2181.*

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