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Vaccinations and children: Timing is everything

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As parents, the health and [safety](#) of our children is our top priority, and we all want to do what is best for them to ensure they grow into happy and healthy adults.

Pediatricians share this goal and truly have the best interest of their patients at heart. That is why vaccinations are recommended for well child care, not only to protect our [children](#) from potentially devastating diseases but to protect our grandchildren and future generations as well.

In the United States, vaccines have reduced or eliminated many infectious diseases that once — not that long ago — routinely killed or caused serious harm to children and adults. Because of vaccines, we no longer see diseases like smallpox and polio.

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Vaccines have led to the dramatic decline in diseases like measles, tetanus and diphtheria. As an even more recent example, within the past 25 years, with the introduction of the Haemophilus influenzae type B vaccine, the incidence of Hib meningitis has declined by 98 percent.

Throughout my training and practice, I have not seen one case of Hib meningitis, whereas just a generation before, Hib meningitis killed one in 600 children yearly

and led to devastating consequences for many of the survivors, including brain damage, mental retardation, hearing loss and seizures.

Vaccines are recommended to be given on a certain schedule for most healthy children for a reason. The timing and spacing of the shots is determined to ensure the body's immune system works at its [best](#), balanced with the need to provide protection to infants and young children at the earliest possible age.

Some parents have concerns about the frequency of shots given to very young children and wonder if it would be safer to spread out vaccinations over a longer period of time, maybe two-three years. There is no reliable evidence to show that a [child](#) would be equally protected against disease with an extended schedule of administration, and no scientific reason why spreading out shots would be safer.

Also, the concern that a child's immune system will be "overwhelmed" by multiple vaccinations at once simply does not hold weight. Infants and children are exposed to many germs (antigens) every day, just by playing, eating and breathing.

It's estimated that the body is exposed to 2,000-6,000 antigens daily and successfully fights these without any harm to the immune system. By comparison, the entire course of childhood vaccinations contains only about 150 antigens.

Delaying receipt of vaccines will unnecessarily increase the amount of time a child is susceptible to a vaccine-preventable illness. This also places serious potential risk on the community in which we live, specifically to those who are too young or those who have a medical condition that prevents them from being able to receive certain vaccinations.

Clear, concise, and reliable information about vaccines is available to [parents](#) online at www.cdc.gov and www.aap.org, or by simply talking to your child's pediatrician about your concerns.

Melissa Thingvoll is a board-certified developmental-behavioral pediatrician at the Olson Huff Center for Child Development and a member of the Western Carolina Medical Society. Her practice focuses on the diagnosis and management of children with autism, ADHD, learning disabilities and other developmental disabilities.

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