



“The Hepatitis B ... Is It Safe for My Baby?”

by
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Dr. Krueger has recently joined the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center faculty as an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics in the division of Neonatology. Dr. Krueger is an MD., Ph.D. who graduated with honors in 1990 from The University of Chicago. He did his residency at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago and returned to The University of Chicago for his fellowship in neonatology, postdoctoral research training, and faculty appointment. His current research at CSMC is primarily focused on brain development, particularly into areas relevant to injury to the developing nervous system. Good Beginnings joins CSMC in welcoming Dr. Krueger to the NICU staff.

There is an absolute blizzard of medical information available today. It's everywhere ... on the internet, in newspapers, on television, and on the radio. And it is more important than ever, for the health of yourself and your baby, that you understand accurate information about the medicines and procedures your doctors recommend. And even with formal medical background, it can be difficult to decipher what information is accurate, and what information is not.

For example, some articles have appeared recently which raise questions about the safety of the hepatitis B vaccine, which is recommended by the US Department of Health and Human Services, the World Health Organization, and The American academy of Pediatrics for all infants to prevent hepatitis B. Your baby may have already been fully immunized with this vaccine, or is in the process of receiving the recommended three doses. Many of these articles give you "the facts" and conclude that hepatitis B vaccination of all children is a "dangerous and scientifically unsubstantiated policy".

I would like to expose these "facts" as "misrepresentations" of the truth, and help you understand why your doctor is recommending the hepatitis B vaccine as the safe way to protect your child against hepatitis B.

They say... "Persons at high risk for hepatitis B are IV drug users, prostitutes, prisoners, and sexually promiscuous persons, and babies born to infected mothers". This is true BUT 30% to 40% of people who get hepatitis B have NO risk factor. People can spread hepatitis B without knowing they have it. And an average American has a 5% (i.e. 1 in 20) lifetime risk of getting hepatitis B.

They say..."90-95% of all hepatitis B cases recover completely after being sick for 3-4 weeks" This is true BUT of the 150,000 people get hepatitis B in this country every year, more than 11,000 people have to be hospitalized, and 4,000 to 5,000 people die from hepatitis B every year in this country from liver cancer, cirrhosis, and acute liver failure.

They say..."in 1996, more children have serious adverse side-effects from the vaccine than ever get the hepatitis B disease." This is not completely accurate. Although serious complications have been reported after hepatitis B vaccination, they are extremely rare, and vaccinations are extremely common. Side-effects from the vaccine are usually either fever or soreness at the site of injection. A baby less than 6 weeks old with a fever might require evaluation by a doctor, or even hospitalization, but would not really be ill, or have a serious complication. Second, just because an adverse effect is reported after a vaccine, it does not mean that the vaccine is the cause of the complication, it may simply be coincidence. In fact, serious complications from vaccines are so rare, that is often impossible to prove that a serious complication is related to the vaccination, or simply unfortunate happenstance.

The reason to give the vaccine to children is that it is not possible to predict who will get the disease later on (and therefore only give it to people at risk), and it is even harder to predict who will get the illness as a child. The vaccine will prevent hepatitis B in your child, and the likelihood of dying from the illness is much higher if you get the disease as a child. And your doctor (as well as The American Academy of Pediatrics) believe the vaccine will protect your child from the risk of hepatitis B into their adult years.

The bottom line is you need to be informed about health decisions for yourself and your family. You should talk with your doctor about vaccine safety. And the bottom line is the hepatitis B vaccine is one of our safest vaccines. As with any medicine there is an extremely small risk that serious problems, even death, could occur after getting the vaccine. However, hepatitis B disease is **MUCH MORE LIKELY** to cause serious illness in an unvaccinated child, than immunization is to cause serious illness in your child. If your child has had a serious reaction to a vaccine ask your doctor to file a vaccine adverse event report, or you may do it yourself by calling toll-free 1(800) 822-7967.

You can find more information about vaccine safety at either <http://www.who.int/gpv-safety/index.html> or <http://www.aap.org/family/parents/vaccine.htm>.