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A Shot to the Heart

Written by [Joy Hollowell](#)

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Carly, JoHannah and Lily Philbrook

Shane Leonard

Having your child vaccinated used to be a no-brainer. These days the rise in neurological disorders is making Maine parents think twice.

When Tiffany Young was pregnant, she and her fiancé, Rob Poindexter, had a hard time deciding on what to name their daughter. They also had a hard time deciding whether or not to vaccinate her. While they eventually named their daughter Addison, they still haven't decided whether or not to vaccinate her three months later.

"We travel a lot," Poindexter says. "What if we don't get her vaccinated and we're on a plane and somebody starts coughing and sneezing? Is she going to be OK? Is she protected?"

"But what if she has an allergic reaction to one of the vaccines?" counters Young.

"It's very nerve-wracking," Poindexter says. "We want to do the right thing, but we don't know what the right thing is."

Their concerns are understandable. In recent years, the safety of childhood vaccines has come under the microscope. Health experts are researching ties between vaccinations and autism and other neurological disorders. At the same time, they're blaming an increase in incidences of whooping cough and mumps on a decrease in childhood vaccinations. It's hard to know what to believe.

Back in the early 1990s, the Centers for Disease Control recommended five vaccines, which covered nine infectious diseases. Today the CDC recommends vaccinating against 14 infectious diseases, including hepatitis, influenza,

tetanus, chicken pox, and the human papillomavirus (HPV). Because some of the vaccines consist of multiple doses, a child could receive up to 23 shots by the time they are 2.

“There is a percentage of parents in Maine who have an irrational, unproven fear of vaccines’ side effects,” says Dr. Jonathan Fanburg, president of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. “Whether it’s distrust of pharmaceutical companies, the government, or even in physicians.”

A recent national immunization study shows that fewer than 74% of Maine kids got their recommended vaccines by age 2. That’s nearly 3% below the national average.

Fanburg believes a big part of the problem is a lack of universal coverage, which Maine nixed a few years ago. Currently, the Maine Immunization Program only provides some free vaccines, and to a select group of children. But thanks to legislation reinstating universal coverage signed by Governor Baldacci this past April, vaccines will be free to all Maine children starting in the summer of 2011.

“I don’t recommend vaccinating anyone, ever,” says Dr. Suzanne Humphries, CEO of the Maine chapter of the International Medical Council on Vaccination. Humphries is also a board-certified medical doctor in Bangor who specializes in nephrology—the branch of internal medicine that deals with kidneys. She became curious about the side effects caused by vaccinations after noticing problems with patients that she claims started after they received the flu shot.

“I decided to take six months and just read everything I could about vaccines,” Humphries says. “What I found is that vaccines have never been proven to be safe. No long-term follow-up studies have ever been done.”

Concerns about how much a young child’s immune system can handle at one time have prompted some parents to stagger vaccinations. But Fanburg points out that there is no medical data to support the practice, adding that it’s actually more beneficial to vaccinate infants, rather than wait until they are older. “Children have a better ‘take’ of vaccines in their first two years of life,” he says. “There is a higher rate of immunogenicity, which is the child’s ability to produce antibodies to the vaccine antigen.”

But Humphries believes that having a natural immunity to a disease is safer. She recommends that parents get their kids tested for titers, which is the number of antibodies to certain diseases that are already in a person’s system.

Nicolle Philbrook of Winterport says she has no reservations about vaccinating her three girls, and that includes annual flu shots as well as the H1N1 vaccine. “It’s pretty simple,” she says. “Why would we want our kids to suffer with diseases that have pretty much been eradicated because of these vaccines?”

But Dr. Humphries says many of these diseases were already on their way to being eradicated when the vaccines were introduced. And she has concerns about the other ingredients in vaccines like formaldehyde, polysorbate 80, MSG, and aluminum. “MSG and aluminum are toxins which affect the nervous system,” Humphries says. “Polysorbate is a sterility agent and formaldehyde is a carcinogen.”

Vaccine safety is something Amy Lane is very concerned about. So much so that the Bangor area mom and her husband have held off on immunizing their now 1-year-old daughter. “We just knew we didn’t want to do it right off the bat,” Lane says. But a harsh reality check hit Lane when she was getting ready to go back to work. “When we started looking at daycares, they said she’d have to have her vaccinations. I was devastated. Thankfully, my mother-in-law offered to take care of her.”

In order to enroll in many daycare programs and kindergarten, Maine kids must be able to provide proof that they’ve had the CDC-recommended vaccinations. State law allows three exemptions to this policy—the first is a note from the child’s

doctor that says vaccines may be medically inadvisable. The other two are annual written statements by the parent disclosing that they're opposed to vaccines due to sincere religious or philosophical beliefs. However, if there is an outbreak of any one of the 14 infectious diseases at school, all unvaccinated students will be sent home for at least 16 days from the last identified case.

Amy Lane, who continues to research vaccine safety, says she's not out to convince people not to vaccinate their children. "It's really about being educated and making the choices you think are right for your child, whatever they may be."

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A native of New York, Joy Hollowell has called Maine home since the turn of the century. For the past nine years, she's been a reporter and coanchor of the Morning Show on WABI-TV. In her spare time she enjoys the great outdoors with her husband and two sons.

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