

TV Drama Reignites Autism-Vaccine Controversy

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a group of 60,000 pediatricians, is very concerned about a new ABC drama, saying its first episode may have caused potential alarm for millions of parents by perpetuating scientifically disproved myths about links between vaccines and autism — with consequences that could be dire.

The dispute surrounds a storyline in the opening episode of the show (aired on January 31, 2008) in which a lawsuit alleges that a child's autism was caused by a vaccine. The jury then awards the mother millions of dollars, "leaving audiences with the destructive idea that vaccines do cause autism," says the AAP.

It's a highly controversial scene, considering doctors and researchers have spent years trying to reassure parents that immunizations help prevent children from getting serious, even deadly diseases *and* that there is, in fact, no scientific evidence that vaccines cause autism.

"A television show that perpetuates the myth that vaccines cause autism is the height of reckless irresponsibility," says the AAP's president. ABC made the decision to run the episode, but did include a disclaimer emphasizing the fictional nature of the show and directed viewers to a government website about autism. Regardless, says the AAP, parents often trust and are easily influenced by what they see on TV, whether the message is based on fact or fiction.

Setting the Record Straight

From Internet sites to content on the tube, medical information — and *mis*information — abounds. And, depending on where you look or whom you ask, the answers about what does and doesn't cause a condition may be vastly different.

So, here are some of the facts, based on the most current medical research and evidence, about immunizations and about autism:

Why are immunizations so important?

Before vaccines, many children died from diseases that vaccines now prevent, such as whooping cough, measles, and polio. Since the start of widespread vaccinations in the United States the number of cases of formerly common childhood illnesses have declined dramatically. Immunizations have protected millions of kids from potentially deadly diseases and saved millions of lives.

In fact, certain diseases crop up so rarely now that parents sometimes ask if vaccines are even necessary anymore. But most diseases that can be prevented by vaccines still exist in the world, even in the United States, so vaccinations still play a crucial role in keeping kids healthy. Immunizing kids also helps protect the health of others, especially people who are not immunized.

Some people are concerned that kids' immune systems could be overwhelmed by receiving more than one vaccination at a time. But the human immune system is remarkably robust — many studies have shown that simultaneous immunization with multiple vaccines is safe for the normal childhood immune system. The AAP recommends simultaneous immunizations when appropriate, saying they are as effective in combination as they are individually, with no greater risk for side effects.

What is autism?

Often referred to collectively as "autism," autism spectrum disorders (or ASDs) are a group of developmental disorders that can affect the way a child behaves, thinks, communicates, and interacts with others — some kids have only mild symptoms, whereas others' are more severe.

Why do some people believe vaccines cause autism?

Study after study has found no scientific evidence that autism is caused by any one vaccine, a combination of vaccines, *or* the mercury-containing preservative called thimerosal, which was once widely used in many childhood vaccines.

The controversial 1998 study that originally started all of the debate by suggesting a link between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism was retracted — or thrown out — in 2004, long after it had been rejected by all major health organizations. But the study and the attention it received influenced parents worldwide and led to a devastating decrease in immunizations.

Despite the lack of scientific evidence that it causes any harm, manufacturers began removing thimerosal from kids' vaccines in 1999 to reduce childhood exposure to mercury and other heavy metals. Now, the flu vaccine is the only one used in kids 2 and under that contains *any* of the preservative. Although some of the flu vaccines do have thimerosal in them, most of those available for children have only trace amounts and are technically considered thimerosal-free.

Still, some parents may hesitate to have their kids vaccinated because they're worried about the risks and the possibility of serious reactions. Although some vaccines may cause mild reactions — like temporary fever and soreness around the shot site — serious reactions are very rare. All in all, the risks of serious reactions to vaccinations are small compared with the health risks associated with the often-serious diseases they're intended to prevent

So, what does cause autism?

The truth is that scientists aren't exactly sure what causes autistic spectrum disorders. But researchers worldwide are trying to get to the bottom of the increasingly diagnosed conditions.

Recent studies have focused on — and discovered possible links between — autism and various environmental, genetic, and chromosomal factors that may influence early brain development, even before birth. And the National Institutes of Health (NIH) hopes to find some concrete answers with its landmark 5-year study on the issue.

How is autism diagnosed?

Because kids develop at different rates, autism can be difficult to recognize and diagnose. Many kids who have autism develop fairly typically in the first year or two of life, and then begin to regress in how they speak and socialize.

Unfortunately, there's no single diagnostic test to detect autism. So, doctors have to focus on whether or not a child has certain types of symptoms and behaviors.

Subtle signs are often present before a child's first birthday — sometimes even earlier — but often go unnoticed until the symptoms are more obvious to parents, usually when a child is between 15 and 36 months old. That's why the AAP recently began urging doctors to routinely screen all children, at 18 and 24 months old, for these common red flags of autism:

- not showing big smiles or other expressions of joy by 6 months
- not sharing back-and-forth smiles, sounds, or other facial expressions by 9 months
- not babbling or using gestures (like pointing or waving bye-bye) by 12 months
- not using single words by 16 months
- not using two-word "spontaneous phrases" by 24 months (that is, not saying two-word phrases on their own without repeating or mimicking someone else)
- losing language or social skills at any age

Although there's no cure for autism, getting help early on is crucial to helping kids cope with the disorder, and to learn and communicate better now and in the long-term.

Why are there so many more cases of autism now?

Calling autism an "urgent public health issue," the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in early 2007 that about 1 in 150 children in the United States are diagnosed with the developmental disorder — a higher rate than health officials had previously thought.

But that doesn't necessarily mean that more kids today have autism. It's actually unclear whether the increased numbers indicate that the disorder is really on the rise. Why? For one, a broader definition of autism can be applied to more children who show varying degrees of symptoms. Plus, health professionals have become more aware of the condition in recent years, which has led to more diagnoses.

What This Means to You

All of the media attention about autism in recent years has made parents far more educated *and* more worried, sometimes unnecessarily, about autism. Although it's important to be aware of possible warning signs, it's also wise to keep things in perspective — there's a wide range of normal and children develop at different rates.

Of course, although some signs or slight delays may not end up being an indication of a bigger problem after all, if you're concerned about *any* aspect of your child's development, don't hesitate to talk to your doctor for information, advice, and possibly reassurance — the earlier, the better.

But if you're concerned because of something you saw on the big or small screen, remember that TV and movies are all about entertainment value. Even when they're based on true stories or current events, storylines are usually meant to reel in viewers and give them a good show — not to educate the public about the most current evidence on an issue. And the more controversial the topic, the more viewers will likely be interested in tuning in.

The same can be said about the Internet — just because it's written somewhere online doesn't mean it's true. Many sites that may look perfectly professional and legitimate are often written by laypeople and may be based more on unsubstantiated rumors, myths, and conspiracy theories than actual research or proven science.

The bottom line: Before you jump to any conclusions or accept any medically related message you see, hear, or read about — no matter how reliable or believable the source may seem — talk to your doctor first. Discuss the information you've encountered, ask what it really means, and get all of the facts.

Immunizations, in particular, remain a crucial tool for protecting kids against many serious and potentially deadly diseases during their childhood and beyond. If you have concerns about any vaccination, be sure to talk to your doctor before making a decision to delay or skip an immunization — a choice that could affect not only your child's health but also that of other kids.