

The facts about MMR and your child.

A letter from the Chief Medical Officer.

If you're the parent of a young child, you've probably read some stories that have appeared recently concerning the safety of MMR immunisation.

As the government's Chief Medical Officer, it is not my job to tell you what decision you should make about immunising your child. But knowing the concerns that are natural to all parents, I feel I have a duty to make sure you have all the facts.

Doubts about the safety of MMR vaccine have centred on two questions. Is there a link between MMR and both autism and bowel disease? Secondly, would separate vaccines be safer than MMR?

Earlier this year I received the latest advice from two expert groups who reviewed all the available evidence concerning MMR. I have always felt that where health issues are concerned, any doubts at all should be made known to you. That is your right. So let me state categorically that there is no confusion in my mind about the safety of MMR vaccine. During the course of my researches, I asked many questions of a number of experts. I have also been asked many questions myself. Let me try to answer the most important points that have been raised.

Q. Is MMR safe?

The vaccine is used in more than 90 countries including America and Europe. Millions of doses were administered in a number of countries before it was introduced to Britain and its safety was long established.

The World Health Organisation agrees that MMR is a highly safe and effective vaccine.

Q. Does MMR cause autism?

Autism, including regressive autism, was well known long before MMR was used in this country. Whilst it's true that more cases of autism are being reported, the increase clearly started before MMR was introduced. But there has been no leap in the numbers of children diagnosed with autism shortly after MMR was introduced – something you would expect to see if there was a link. Coverage of MMR went from zero to 90%

almost overnight, so if it caused autism, we might expect the number of cases to escalate markedly then. This did not happen. What does tend to happen is that the first signs of autism are often noticed in a child's second year, and MMR is usually given between 12 and 15 months. Therefore, some people might conclude wrongly that there is a link. Recent UK and US research concluded that no link was found.

Q. Does MMR cause bowel disease?

It has been suggested that there is a new form of bowel disease in children with autism, which follows MMR. The evidence shows that children with autism are no more likely to have inflammatory bowel disease than children without autism. UK children with autism were no more likely to see their GPs in the six months after MMR than non-autistic children. Again, you might expect them to go to the GP if MMR had made them ill.

Q. Are three single doses safer than one?

Separating the vaccines puts children at risk of the very diseases we're seeking to prevent. Where single dose vaccines were used instead of MMR there are cases of measles – and even deaths, as well as babies damaged by congenital rubella – both avoided here by MMR.

Q. Does MMR overload young bodies?

Again, all the evidence refutes this. In fact, a child's immune system is designed to cope with many different viruses at the same time, so a combined vaccine is a natural choice. The other advantage of MMR is that your child has only one injection, not three.

I am convinced of the safety and effectiveness of immunising with MMR and I hope you will feel confident that MMR is the safest way to protect your child. If you have any more questions, please call NHS Direct on 08 45 46 47.

Lie Donalson