



Catawba County Public Health

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For Release: April 6, 2016

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VACCINES WORKING SO WELL, DISEASES DON'T POP UP AS OFTEN

HICKORY, N.C. – You may not have heard a lot about diphtheria, measles, whooping cough or polio, but that's a good thing – it means childhood vaccinations are working.

That's one reason why April 16-23 has been designated as National Infant Immunization Week. Although there won't be parades in the street, and nurses brandishing needles of vaccine won't be honored in the news as heroes, the week is especially important for the overall health of infants, children and adults alike. Despite the marked lack of public celebration, the week will bring attention to a potentially lifesaving service that is performed by public health every day.

Because vaccines prevent disease so well, some parents may not have heard of some the serious ailments they prevent – one of which is polio.

The issue became real for me on my graduation day from Gardner-Webb University. Our guest speaker was Martha Mason, a woman who contracted polio as a child and spent more than 60 years of her life encircled by an iron lung, a machine that forced air into and out of her lungs. After hearing her story, and knowing that there is a vaccine that prevents the disease, I am a strong advocate for vaccination. While Martha contracted polio before the vaccine was developed and its use became widespread, millions of other children have been spared her fate, making polio a disease of the past.

Even though we don't hear much about vaccine-preventable diseases today, they do still circulate. For example, several cases of mumps were identified in Iredell and Mecklenburg counties earlier this year.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, these diseases can be especially serious for infants and young children. That's why infant immunizations are so important. They protect against diphtheria, tetanus, and whooping cough (pertussis), haemophilus influenzae type b, polio, pneumococcal, rotavirus, influenza, chickenpox, hepatitis B, hepatitis A, and measles, mumps and rubella.

The goal is to provide infants with immunity early in life, before they are exposed to potentially life-threatening diseases. Today, that includes 14 diseases and prevents an estimated 322 million illnesses, 21 million hospitalizations, and 732,000 deaths over the course of their lifetimes, according to the CDC.

Vaccines.gov has all kinds of practical advice about vaccines, along with many great reasons for getting your infant immunized.

- Immunizations can save your child's life. Diseases that once sickened or killed thousands of children, have been eradicated or brought down to extremely low levels, thanks to vaccines.
- Vaccination is safe and effective. Vaccines are only given after extensive testing to make sure that they do not harm children and that they prevent disease.

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- Immunization protects the whole community. By keeping a disease out of a community through vaccination of healthy people, others with weakened immune systems are less likely to be exposed to the contagious diseases vaccines prevent.
- Immunizations can save you time and money. Non-vaccination can hold up a child's entry into kindergarten, and a child with a vaccine-preventable disease may not be allowed at school while they are sick. Additionally, vaccines are inexpensive, especially when compared to the costs of treating illness and disability that can be caused by these diseases.

Despite the benefits of vaccines, they can be expensive for some families. That's one place where Catawba County Public Health can help. The Vaccines for Children (VFC) program provides vaccines to children who are underinsured or whose parents or guardians may not be able to afford them. The VFC program provides free, state-supplied vaccines to children who are Medicaid eligible, uninsured, American Indian or Alaska Native, or whose insurance will not cover the vaccines for various reasons. To find out if your child qualifies, ask your child's doctor or call Catawba County Public Health at (828) 695-5800.

Catawba County Public Health, located off Fairgrove Church Road behind Catawba Valley Medical Center in Hickory, N.C., works to protect and promote the health of all county residents. For more information, please call (828) 695-5800 or visit www.catawbacountync.gov/phealth.

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