

Bulletin No. 11
July 28, 1999
Immunizations in the News**Thimerosal in Vaccines****What is thimerosal?**

Thimerosal is a mercury-containing preservative used in some vaccines to prevent bacterial contamination. It has been used in vaccines and other products since the 1930s. Vaccines manufactured with thimerosal contain small amounts (from 12.5 to 25 µg/0.5 ml dose of vaccine) of mercury.

Which commonly used vaccines contain thimerosal?

Vaccine	Brand(s)	Manufacturer
Hepatitis B	All	
DTaP	<i>Acel-Immune</i> [®] <i>Tripedia</i> [®] <i>Certiva</i> [®]	Lederle Connaught N American Vaccine
DT	All	
Td	All	
Hib	<i>HibTITER</i> [®]	Lederle
Influenza	All	
Pneumococcal	<i>Pnu-Immune 23</i> [®]	Lederle

Thimerisol is **NOT** found in these vaccines:

- hepatitis A
- polio (IPV or OPV)
- MMR
- varicella
- rotavirus
- other brands of DTaP, Hib, or pneumococcal vaccine

Why is this an issue?

On July 7, 1999, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) released a Joint Statement about thimerosal which noted, "**There are no data or evidence of any harm caused by the level of exposure that some children may have encountered in following the existing immunization schedule.**" Nevertheless, manufacturers were directed to remove thimerosal from vaccines "to increase the existing margin of safety even further."

The Joint Statement recommended that, until thimerosal-free vaccines were available, "**all childhood vaccines should be given according to the currently recommended schedule.**" As stated, "**The large risks of not vaccinating children far outweigh the unknown and probably much smaller risk, if any, of cumulative exposure to thimerosal-containing vaccines over the first 6 months of life.**" Clinicians could "take advantage of the flexibility within the existing schedule for infants born to *known* HBsAg negative women to postpone the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine from birth until 2 to 6 months of age." The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that hepatitis B vaccination be carried out for infants born to HBsAg negative mothers belonging to populations or groups that have a high risk of early childhood HBV infection. These infants should receive hepatitis B vaccine at birth.

Alaska Recommendation for Infant Hepatitis B Vaccine

The Alaska Division of Public Health and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium Immunization and Hepatitis Programs strongly recommend that Alaska health care providers continue to follow the current Alaska hepatitis B schedule (i.e., birth-1 month, 2 months, and 6 months) for all Alaska children and not to postpone the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine.

- No data are available to support any harm caused by thimerosal.
- Hepatitis B is endemic in certain populations in Alaska. Immunization delays are likely to result in increased risk of transmission in early childhood and increase the possibility that the child will fail to complete the vaccine schedule.

Rotavirus Vaccine**What has occurred?**

Since *RotaShield*[®] (Wyeth-Ayerst) vaccine was licensed in the fall of 1998 to prevent rotavirus infection, an estimated 1.4 million doses have been administered in the United States. (*Note: To date, this vaccine has not been available through the Section of Epidemiology.*) From Sept. 1, 1998-July 7, 1999, fifteen (15) cases of intussusception occurred in infants who had received the vaccine and were reported to the national Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System.

What is intussusception?

Intussusception is a relatively rare type of bowel obstruction that occurs when one segment of the bowel becomes enfolded within another segment. Most cases are of unknown etiology. Neither rotavirus disease nor rotavirus vaccine has been established as a cause of intussusception.

What is being done?

Additional studies are now being planned by the CDC to determine if rotavirus vaccine causes intussusception. **While studies are being conducted** (projected completion in November), **the CDC, AAP, and the manufacturer recommend discontinuing use of *RotaShield*[®].**

For further information on these issues or other immunization questions:

(907) 269-8000
(AK Immunization Program)

<http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us>

<http://www.cdc.gov/nip>