



NEWS

Fact or fiction: 5 common vaccine myths and the truths you need to know

From autism to natural immunity, an expert tackles misconceptions

By [Megan DeLaire](#) Toronto.com

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Infectious diseases, which before the advent of immunization were the leading cause of death worldwide, accounted for **less than 5 per cent of all deaths in Canada in 2019**. Nonetheless, vaccine hesitancy and the anti-vaccine movement still influence how many Canadians feel about immunization.

For example, the Angus Reid Institute reported on Dec. 14 that while 48 per cent of

Ontarians said they want to be vaccinated immediately, one in seven said they will not seek the vaccine.

While there are a variety of cultural, political and societal factors that contribute to vaccine hesitancy, misinformation surrounding vaccines doesn't help.

Ian Culbert, executive director of the Canadian Public Health Association, debunks some of the prevailing myths surrounding vaccines.

Myth: Vaccines cause autism spectrum disorder

Culbert said this myth, like many surrounding vaccines, relates to children, since many vaccines are intended for children.

"The number one myth that will not go away is that the measles, mumps, rubella vaccine causes autism, and this is absolutely false. There is no scientific evidence to support this claim," he said.

Another myth linking vaccines to autism states that giving too many vaccines to children can trigger the disorder.

"There's no evidence to link any other vaccines to autism," he said. "And while the number of kids being diagnosed on the spectrum is increasing, this is more because the diagnostic methods now diagnose children with milder symptoms, and there's much greater awareness."

Myth: New vaccines are approved without rigorous testing

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Culbert said the fear that vaccines aren't safe, that they're not adequately tested for safety and are forced through the approval process, is especially relevant now, as the first COVID-19 vaccines approved by Health Canada are administered throughout Ontario. Nonetheless, it isn't based in fact.

“Canadians can have a high level of confidence in any vaccine that is approved by Health Canada because it is a very rigorous approval process that these products go through,” he said. “In fact, it is often a complaint of the industry that our system is too rigorous, that it takes too long for vaccines to be approved.”

Myth: The diseases we vaccinate against aren't that serious

Another misconception Culbert hears around vaccines is that most of the diseases Canadians are vaccinated against — like measles — aren't very serious or life-threatening. He said that although medical advances have made the treatments for these illnesses more successful, that doesn't mean the illnesses are any less serious.

“The fact is that measles outbreaks still happen, and complications do occur in 10 per cent of cases. People do still actually die from measles. Why would you take the risk?” he said. “Pertussis — or whooping cough — still kills between one and four babies in Canada every year.”

Culbert said approximately one in 400 babies who survive pertussis — a serious childhood illness with a vaccine — suffer from permanent brain damage. And tetanus, he said, kills at least 10 per cent of people who contract it.

“Do you want to play the odds with your child's health? That's often what parents are doing.”

Myth: If most other people get vaccinated, my family doesn't need to

Some Canadians reject vaccines on the grounds that the herd immunity achieved by everyone else's immunization makes it unnecessary for their family to be vaccinated.

“The problem with this is it only works if enough people are being vaccinated. If too many people take this attitude, then we won't achieve community immunity, which is that state at which an infection won't spread,” Culbert said. He added that opting not to vaccinate also puts people with compromised immune systems, especially children, at risk.

“If they have a compromised immune system due to another infection or perhaps they’re undergoing cancer treatments, they cannot be vaccinated,” he said, “so they are particularly at risk of these diseases because of their immune status.”

Myth: It's better to gain immunity naturally from an infection than through vaccination

Culbert said the idea that people should intentionally infect themselves or their children with an infectious disease — for example, through a chickenpox party — to gain immunity is flawed and dangerous.

“With some infections, especially with COVID-19, we know it’s not a lasting immunity, so you could easily become reinfected. That does not seem to be the case with the COVID-19 vaccine,” he said. “Also, why would you put your child through that if you don’t have to?”

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