

# Prevention the best medicine for parents

By Dr. Dion Neame

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Like all paediatricians, I spend a lot of my time trying to make kids feel better – to get them through both minor sicknesses and serious illnesses. Many times parents feel helpless, watching as an infection runs its course and makes their child sick. While not every disease is preventable, there have been important advancements in recent years that have led to vaccines to help prevent serious infections. And while the prospect of giving needles to a baby can be overwhelming for parents, the potential consequences of contracting these infections are much more worrisome.

Immunizations are given to infants to defend against severe infections. By priming their immune systems with vaccinations, our infants' bodies will recognize the offending infections and kill the infectious agents before they are able to cause harm. If we don't vaccinate, serious damage can come to our children, the worst of which may be death.

Pneumococcal disease is just one example of a potentially life-threatening infection that is now largely preventable through a widely available vaccine called Prevnar. This vaccine is now available for free for all newborns across Canada, and some provinces cover the cost for older children. It protects against the bacteria *s. pneumoniae*, the leading cause of bacterial infection in children less than two years of age. This bacteria can cause meningitis, pneumonia, blood infections and common ear infections.

Hundreds of thousands of children in Canada suffer from pneumococcal disease. Each year, pneumococcal infection causes an estimated 65 cases of meningitis, 700 cases of bacteremia, 2,200 cases of hospitalized pneumonia, 9,000 cases of non-hospitalized pneumonia and 15 deaths in children under the age of five.<sup>1</sup>

Health Canada stipulates that Prevnar be delivered in four doses – at two, four, six and 12–15 months. With new vaccination programs being implemented across Canada, infants will be getting multiple needles, sometimes two on one doctor's visit. I recommend giving babies a dose of acetaminophen or ibuprofen prior to immunizations and for the next 24 hours. This will lessen pain from the needles and decrease minor side effects such as fever.

The important thing to remember with vaccinations is that we need to be proactive. We can't wait around for infections to affect our children. Even if doctors do diagnose children with infections, often it is too late to react

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<sup>1</sup> National Advisory Committee on Immunization. Statement on recommended use of pneumococcal conjugate vaccine. Canada Communicable Disease Report. 2002:28.