Children at risk from falling UK vaccination rates, warn doctors

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Children risk becoming 'unseen victims of the COVID-19 pandemic," with evidence suggesting they may be missing routine vaccinations, warn researchers.

In a peer-reviewed editorial, published in the *BMJ*, researchers from Imperial College London warn the UK is at increased risk of infectious diseases such as measles following the COVID pandemic.

The team of team of doctors and public health researchers, from the Child Health Unit at Imperial, say many families may be staying away from GP surgeries during the COVID pandemic. Evidence suggests the number of MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccines delivered in England dropped by 20 percent during the first three weeks of the lockdown says editorial author Professor Sonia Saxena, GP and head of the Imperial's Child Health Unit.

Professor Saxena said: "Vaccinations are more crucial than ever—particularly as we emerge from lockdown and children begin to return to school and childcare settings. Vaccines are a priority for GP surgeries, yet we are seeing this messaging has been lost. Instead, the dominant message is everyone should stay at home and avoid burdening the NHS. We need to make clear GP surgeries are open—and that vaccines can be delivered safely to children."

Parents cancelling or postponing vaccinations

The team cite a survey of 752 health visitors by the Institute of Health Visiting in May 2020, where over 60 percent reported contact with families who had considered cancelling or postponing their child's vaccinations.

Parents have also expressed concerns about overburdening the NHS, and fear of exposure to COVID-19 when attending for vaccination, say the authors. Two new parents were among the team who reviewed the editorial, with one commenting: "As a parent of a just-turned one year old who had her vaccination last week, my thoughts relating to vaccination were I didn't want to overburden the NHS system, and whether the vaccination was going to be administered assuring maximum safety for my daughter."

Yet vaccinations can be delivered safely says Dr. Helen Skirrow, editorial author from Imperial's School of Public Health, and Specialist Registrar in Public Health. "The UK lost its measles-free status last year, and if vaccine rates fall we may be in danger of losing herd immunity against measles. Measles, can be very dangerous in children—and we should not be seeing measles outbreaks in 2020, when we have an effective vaccine to protect our children."

BAME families more at risk

The team call for urgent public messaging to make clear to families the importance of routine vaccinations.

Professor Saxena explained: "Families concerned

about vaccine safety may be susceptible to strongly voiced opinion and misinformation in the media and social media. We need to ensure we address these concerns, with messaging explaining vaccination is one of the most important ways of protecting your child."

She added: "We also need to ensure pre-existing inequalities in vaccine uptake do not widen. Parents from minority ethnic groups may understandably feel vulnerable and avoid healthcare settings, bearing in mind evidence suggesting risk of dying from COVID-19 during hospital admission is up to fourfold higher among black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups. Yet the health of our children and the whole population depends on high uptake of routine vaccinations."

"Routine vaccination during COVID-19 pandemic response" is published in the *BMJ*

More information: Sonia Saxena et al. Routine vaccination during covid-19 pandemic response, *BMJ* (2020). DOI: 10.1136/bmj.m2392

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