

Majority of Americans say benefits of childhood vaccines outweigh risks

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Credit: National Cancer Institute

Despite debate about the safety of childhood vaccines among some groups in the public, an overwhelming majority of Americans (82%) support requiring children attending public school to be vaccinated for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), according to a new Pew Research Center survey. Some 73% of Americans see high preventive health benefits from the MMR vaccine and 66% believe there is a low risk of

side effects from the vaccine. Overall, 88% believe that the benefits of the MMR inoculation outweigh the risks.

Yet, several groups express more concern about the safety of the MMR vaccine, including parents of young children. About half (52%) of parents with children ages 4 or younger say the risk of [side effects](#) from the MMR vaccine is low, while 43% say the risk of side effects is medium or high. By comparison, 70% of those with no minor-age children say the risk of side effects is low, while 29% say the risk is medium or high. As far as potential benefits, 60% of parents with children 4 or younger say the preventive health benefits of the MMR vaccine are high, compared with 75% of parents with school-age children (ages 5-17) and 76% of people with no children younger than 18.

"In addition to parents of young children, this analysis finds that adults under age 30, blacks and people with lower knowledge about science topics see a higher risk of side effects or lower preventive health benefits from this vaccine," said lead author and Associate Director of Research Cary Funk. "Public health benefits from vaccines hinge on very high levels of immunization in the population, so it's important to understand which groups hold reservations about the MMR vaccine," Funk said.

The survey finds that public views of medical scientists and their research related to [childhood vaccines](#) are broadly positive, though mixed, regardless of parent status, race, ethnicity and experience using alternative medicine. The data:

- 73% of U.S. adults believe that medical scientists should have a major role in policy decisions related to childhood vaccines.
- 55% say they trust information from medical scientists a lot to give a full and accurate picture of the health effects of vaccines,

35% trust medical scientists some and just 9% have no or not too much trust in medical scientists. People are less trusting of other groups about this issue - just 13% trust information from pharmaceutical industry leaders about the health effects of the MMR vaccines a lot.

- 52% of Americans say scientists' research on childhood vaccines is influenced by the best available scientific evidence most of the time, and 55% say such research is influenced by scientists' concern for the best interests of children's health most of the time.
- 47% say medical scientists understand the health effects of the MMR vaccine very well, 43% say they understand this fairly well and just 10% say medical scientists do not understand this at all or not too well.
- 55% believe that "almost all" medical scientists are in agreement that the MMR vaccine is safe for healthy children, while 28% say that more than half of medical scientists agree about this.

"This survey looks in-depth at people's views about vaccines to explore which groups have more reservations about the MMR vaccine and whether or not those views are connected with people's trust in medical science," said Funk. "One of the striking findings in this study is that parents of young children express more concern about the safety of the MMR vaccine. Yet, like other Americans, they hold broadly positive views about medical scientists and their research on childhood vaccines."

The data show there are some generational differences in these views, with adults younger than 30 less likely to see medical scientists in a positive light. People who are generally less knowledgeable about science are much less trusting of medical scientists and see higher risk and lower benefits from the MMR vaccine.

There are generational differences in views of the MMR vaccine and

trust in medical scientists.

- Seniors, ages 65 and older, support a school-based requirement for the MMR vaccine rather than leaving the decision up to parents by a margin of 90% to 8%. By comparison, 77% of adults ages 18 to 29 support a school-based requirement, while 21% of this group says parents should be able to decide not to have their children vaccinated even if that may create health risks for others.
- Younger adults, ages 18 to 29, are a bit less likely than older age groups to say medical scientists understand the health effects of childhood vaccines very well and to perceive strong consensus among medical scientists that the MMR vaccine is safe. Some 47% of adults ages 18 to 29 think the best evidence influences research findings on childhood vaccines most of the time, compared with 60% of those ages 65 and older.

Those with high [science knowledge](#) and higher incomes are especially likely to see high preventive health benefits of the MMR vaccine and to support school-based MMR vaccine requirements.

- 91% of those with high science knowledge (based on a nine-item index across a range of science topics) rate the preventive health benefits of the MMR vaccine as high. By contrast, 55% of those with low science knowledge say the health benefits are high.
- People with high science knowledge are more likely than those low in science knowledge to trust medical scientists and their research. About three-fourths (73%) of those high in science knowledge trust information from medical scientists about the effects of the MMR vaccine a lot, compared with 40% of those low in science knowledge; 72% of those with high science knowledge think the research findings on vaccines are influenced by the best available evidence most of the time, compared with

34% of those with low science knowledge on a nine-item index.

- People with higher family incomes (\$75,000 or more) are more inclined than those with lower family incomes to see high health benefits and low risk of side effects from the MMR vaccine. Those with higher family incomes are especially strong in their support for a requirement that all children be vaccinated against MMR in order to attend public schools.

Groups with more concern about the MMR vaccine include those who have used alternative medicine and blacks. But political groups hold similar views on childhood vaccine issues.

- The 8% of Americans who report never using over-the-counter medications for cold or flu symptoms and the 20% of Americans who have used alternative medicine instead of conventional treatment are more concerned about the risk of side effects from the MMR vaccine. These groups are comparatively more likely to think that parents should be able to decide whether or not to vaccinate their children even if that decision means increased health risk for others.
- Blacks (56%) are less inclined than whites (79%) to see the preventive health benefits of the MMR vaccine as high. More blacks (44%) than whites (30%) see the risk of side effects from the MMR vaccine as medium or high.
- Republicans (including Republican-leaning independents) hold roughly the same views as Democrats (including those leaning Democratic) about the [health benefits](#) and risk of side effects of the MMR vaccine. However, political conservatives are slightly more likely than either moderates or liberals to say that parents should be able to decide not to vaccinate their [children](#) - though seven-in-ten or more of all three ideology groups support requiring the MMR vaccine for all schoolchildren because of the potential health risk to others. A 61% majority of Americans give

the media positive marks for their coverage of issues related to the MMR [vaccine](#).

- Half of Americans say they follow news about childhood vaccines very (13%) or somewhat (37%) closely.

Most Americans see reports of conflicting health studies as part of the march of research progress.

- Fully 74% of adults say conflicting news reports about disease prevention are understandable because "new research is constantly improving our understanding," while 23% of adults say such research "cannot really be trusted because so many studies conflict with each other."

Most Americans who have visited a health care provider in the past year say they felt listened to and that the provider "really cared about their health and well-being."

- 84% of those who have been to a health care provider in the past year for an ailment felt their provider "really cared about their health and well-being" and 80% say they got all the information they needed for further treatment and at-home care.
- Only 23% of this group reports feeling rushed by their [health care provider](#) and just 15% felt confused about the instructions they received for further treatment or at-home care.
- 30% of Americans say they "just ask a doctor for advice" when it comes to making decisions about treatment for a serious health problem, while 68% say they do their own [research](#), either to check for other treatment options (21%), to understand potential side effects for a recommended treatment (9%) or simply to learn more about the recommended treatment (36%).

These are among the key findings from the new report, which is based

on a nationally representative survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016, among 1,549 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points.

More information: [www.pewinternet.org/2017/02/02 ... ines-outweigh-risks/](http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/02/02...ines-outweigh-risks/)

Provided by Pew Research Center

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