

Vaccine Hesitancy - Yellow Fever Controversy

What is the issue?

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- A renowned cancer specialist Prof Martin Gore of the UK died recently after a routine yellow fever vaccination.

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- This has reignited a controversy over vaccines around the world.

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What is the yellow fever vaccine?

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- Yellow fever spreads through mosquitoes. It is often associated with jaundice, and hence the name yellow.

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- It leads to death in a significant proportion of patients.

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- So the vaccine is often compulsory before travelling to any of the yellow fever-endemic countries in parts of Africa, and Central and South America.

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- Known as 17D, the yellow fever vaccine is a live, weakened yellow fever virus.

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- As it is live, the body responds to it the same way as in a full-blown infection.

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- This ensures that the body knows the vulnerabilities of that virus for the rest of the person's life.

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- Thus, when an invasion happens, blood cells that retain the memory of that virus, work towards defeating the nascent invasion and thus prevent a full-blown infection.

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How safe is the vaccine?

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- The yellow fever vaccine is considered by the World Health Organization as extremely effective, safe and affordable.
- A single dose is sufficient to confer sustained immunity and life-long protection against yellow fever disease.
- There are, however, reports about multisystem organ failure following vaccination.
- There are also reports of individual patient deaths with complications after yellow fever vaccination and of yellow fever after vaccination.
- The risk of the vaccine causing serious harm or death is extremely low, but there are complications that may arise.
- Among mild problems associated with the vaccine is fever with aches, soreness, redness or swelling where the shot was given.
- These occur in up to 1 person out of 4, usually begin soon after the shot, and can last up to a week.
- A severe allergic reaction can occur in 1 person in 55,000, and a severe nervous system reaction in 1 in 125,000.
- A life-threatening illness with organ failure can happen in 1 person in 250,000, and more than half in the last group die.

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What is the complication?

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- Given the above, vaccine hesitancy is a growing problem the world over.
- Recently, the Delhi High Court underlined the importance of parental consent in vaccines given to children in school.
- In the US too, states like Minnesota have seen rising vaccine hesitancy, especially among immigrant populations.

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- Nevertheless, there is evidence available in public health that vaccines provide return for investment.

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- The resources spent on vaccines are more than recovered in the resources saved by the mortality and morbidity that is prevented throughout the lifetime of an individual.

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Is there resistance to vaccines in India?

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- Resistance to vaccines surfaces periodically.

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- The diphtheria vaccine is among the oldest in the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP).

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- But it has caused the death of 24 children in Delhi in September 2018, and 27 in Nuh district (Haryana) in December.

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- The Health Ministry has thus commissioned a study on vaccine hesitancy, to be conducted by its Immunisation Technical Support Unit.

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Source: Indian Express

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