



An elementary school student gets vaccinated against Covid-19 in Depok, West Java, Indonesia. Experts have said that vaccination will keep children from becoming severely ill and reduce the risk of severe complications. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Why kids need the Covid-19 vaccine

With the Omicron variant and waves in infections, there is a worry that more children can get infected and more will get severe forms of Covid-19

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Why do children need to be vaccinated against Covid-19 when the majority of them get a mild form of the disease?

Experts say this is to ward off serious illness in case of future surges of the virus.

Dr Cheng Tai Kin, who runs Kinder Clinic at Parkway East Hospital, says: "With the Omicron variant and waves in infections, the fear is that the base number of cases grows by a lot."

"Then you will have more children infected and, as a result, a corresponding higher number of them getting severe forms of Covid-19."

This means they would need hospitalisation, oxygen supplementation and possibly intensive care.

Dr Cheng notes that when the number of community cases in Singapore was low, not many children were infected. But as the figure grew in recent months, so did the number of kids getting Covid-19.

Vaccination has not been rolled out for children under the age of 12, who accounted for 11.2 per cent of all cases on Nov 19.

In comparison, the figure was only 6.7 per cent of all cases four weeks ago in October.

There have also been one or two cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) every week in Singapore since mid-October, with some cases requiring care in the intensive care unit.

MIS-C, which affects a small minority of children afflicted with Covid-19, is a condition where different body parts, including the heart, lungs, kidney, brain and eyes, can become inflamed.

Dr Elizabeth Tham, consultant and head of the division of paediatric allergy, immunology and rheumatology at National University Hospital's Khoo Teck Puat - National University Children's Medical Institute, says the late effects like "long Covid" in children are still unknown.

This refers to lingering symptoms like fatigue and chest pains weeks and months after infection.

"High-risk children with pre-existing medical conditions that put them at higher risk of severe Covid-19 would also benefit from early vaccination," she says.

"Vaccination also reduces the extent of transmission to adults, elderly or vulnerable people around them who may be medi-

cally ineligible for vaccination."

Senior Minister of State for Health Janil Puthucherry said last week that vaccination will keep children from becoming severely ill and reduce the risk of severe complications such as MIS-C.

A study of the Pfizer vaccine conducted in the United States showed that it is 90.7 per cent effective in preventing symptomatic forms of Covid-19 in children aged five to 11.

In response to parents' concerns about the safety of the vaccine, Dr Janil cited results from a study of the Pfizer vaccine conducted in the United States that show the risks of adverse reactions are low.

In fact, children aged five to 11 had fewer side effects compared with those aged between 16 and 25.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said last Thursday it had received reports of eight cases of myocarditis in children aged five to 11 who received the vaccine.

There had been over seven million vaccine doses given in this age group at the time that the data was examined, with 5.1 million first doses and two million second doses.

Dr Cheng says the data is too preliminary and needs to be analysed further. "It's too early to conclude. We need to look at the baseline rate of myocarditis in this age group of children without vaccination."

"Eight cases from seven million doses is roughly one in a million. That's 50 times lower than the 40 to 69 cases per million doses in male teenagers that was previously reported."

According to the CDC, the reporting rates of myocarditis for boys aged 16 to 17 were about 69 cases per million second doses administered and around 40 cases per million second doses in boys aged 12 to 15.

Given that more than seven million children in the US, Israel and Europe have received at least their first dose of the vaccine, Dr Tham says: "The real-world safety data from their experience should be available very soon."

"There have thus far been no reports that children in this age group experience higher adverse event rates than adolescents and adults."

Other countries such as Canada, Israel and Australia have also given the green light for the use of the Pfizer vaccine for children aged between five and 11.

High-risk children with pre-existing medical conditions that put them at higher risk of severe Covid-19 would also benefit from early vaccination. Vaccination also reduces the extent of transmission to adults, elderly or vulnerable people around them who may be medically ineligible for vaccination.

DR ELIZABETH THAM on why children should get vaccinated. She is consultant and head of the division of paediatric allergy, immunology and rheumatology at National University Hospital's Khoo Teck Puat - National University Children's Medical Institute.

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