

Homoeopathy and vaccination

Summary

A significant minority of people use or consider complementary and alternative medicines (commonly referred to as CAM). Complementary therapies are used in conjunction with conventional medicine while alternative therapies are used instead of conventional medicine. Homoeopathy is one such form of CAM. Some people consider homoeopathy (also spelt 'homeopathy') for their child's immunisation rather than conventional immunisation. However, unlike conventional vaccinations, there has been no rigorously tested research to demonstrate the safety or effectiveness of homoeopathic preparations, or other CAM therapies, to provide protection against childhood infectious diseases.

This fact sheet aims to discuss this issue further by answering these commonly asked questions below:

- What is homoeopathy?
- Are homoeopathic preparations an alternative to conventional immunisation?
- How effective are homoeopathic preparations in preventing infectious diseases?
- Which is safer, homoeopathic preparations or conventional medicine, for immunising my child?
- What do homoeopathic organisations recommend?
- Can homoeopathic preparations be given instead of conventional vaccines?
- Can homoeopathic preparations be given to lessen the possible side effects of conventional immunisation?
- Are all homoeopathy practitioners the same?

What is homoeopathy?

Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843), a German physician and chemist, was the founder of homoeopathy. The fundamental principle behind homoeopathy is that 'like cures like'. Practitioners believe that homoeopathic preparations work by stimulating a healing response in the body by way of its similarity to the existing complaint.

Homoeopathic preparations in general are made using the processes known as 'potentiation' and 'succussion' meaning that the disease, tissue or plant extract (known as the nosode) is diluted in water a number of times with vigorous shaking between each dilution to the point where

none of the original material is contained within the preparation by the end of the process. The process of succussion is said to transfer the protective activity of the nosode used to the diluting water. It is unlikely that the preparation contains a single molecule of the original extract at the end of the process. Many of the schedules to administer these preparations are complex and extend over a period of years, with multiple doses, without any evidence of efficacy.

Several homoeopathic preparations are available and come in differing strengths and constituents. Each homoeopathic practitioner has a different approach to their preparations, probably because there is no centralised body to regulate the practice of homoeopathy in Australia. Many homoeopathic preparations do not undergo rigorous testing by the Therapeutic Goods Administration like other drugs.

Are homoeopathic preparations an alternative to conventional immunisation?

No. Both the British Homoeopathic Association and the Australian Register of Homoeopaths recommend that people should receive conventional immunisations unless a medical condition precludes this. Although homoeopathic preparations and schedules have been developed claiming to prevent childhood infectious diseases such as pertussis (whooping cough), tetanus, diphtheria, measles, mumps and rubella (German measles), many homoeopaths appear to support the need for children to be vaccinated conventionally.

Homoeopathic immunisation programs consist of a number of different oral preparations which are supposed to reduce the incidence or severity of the above childhood diseases. However, there is no evidence to support these claims. Although homoeopathic preparations for the treatment of some health problems, such as childhood diarrhoea and hay fever, have been scientifically tested, systematic reviews of these studies state that the findings are not convincing enough for recommendation. No research can be found to demonstrate the effectiveness of homoeopathic preparations for prevention or treatment of vaccine preventable diseases.

Some homoeopathic preparations have names similar to the disease they are supposed to prevent. For example,

pertussin is meant to prevent pertussis (whooping cough) while diphtherinum is said to prevent diphtheria. Unlike conventional vaccines, homoeopathic preparations use nosodes which are diluted to such an extent that no trace of the original pathogen (nosode) remains. These preparations are given orally to babies on a regular basis (usually monthly to bimonthly) from 1 month to 26 months of age and cost around \$95, plus postage and handling, for the completed schedule.

How effective are homoeopathic preparations in preventing infectious diseases?

The safety and effectiveness of homoeopathic preparations in preventing childhood diseases such as whooping cough and measles is unknown. No studies can be found which have measured the safety or effectiveness of these preparations. Therefore, unlike conventional immunisation, there is no rigorously tested research evidence to support this form of therapy in the prevention of childhood infectious diseases.

Some people believe that homoeopathic preparations will provide protection against infectious diseases on the basis of very little evidence. For example, Golden's unpublished survey of 150 children who had received homoeopathic immunisation 5–10 years prior to his study demonstrated that 72%–100% of children did not develop the disease against which they had been treated with homoeopathic preparations. However, 20%–30% of these children had also received conventional immunisation. These findings are not surprising because conventional immunisation programs have eradicated or radically reduced the occurrence of most childhood infectious diseases in our country. Therefore, the incidence of these infections is so low that you would not expect to see it in a sample as small as 150 children, whether or not they had received homoeopathy. Interestingly, 15 children in Golden's study stated they had experienced side effects to the homoeopathic 'vaccines'. No other reports evaluating homoeopathic immunisation could be found.

Which is safer, homoeopathic preparations or conventional medicine, for immunising my child?

Conventional medicines such as vaccines are thoroughly scrutinised, tested, evaluated and followed up for their safety and effectiveness. Homoeopathic preparations do not undergo the same level of attention. Many homoeopathic preparations have not been subjected to

testing or approval through government regulatory bodies, such as the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration or the United States Food and Drug Administration, which is standard practice for conventional vaccines.

What do homoeopathic organisations recommend?

Both the British Homeopathic Association and the Australian Register of Homoeopaths recommend that people should receive conventional immunisation and that homoeopathic preparations "should not be recommended as a substitute for [conventional] immunisation". Anecdotally, however, this is not the belief of all homoeopaths.

Can homoeopathic immunisation be given instead of conventional vaccines?

No. The Australian Register of Homoeopaths states homoeopathics "should not be recommended as a substitute for [conventional] immunisation". Unless reliable scientific research is conducted which demonstrates the effectiveness and safety of homoeopathic preparations in preventing infectious diseases, they cannot be recommended as an alternative to conventional immunisation.

Can homoeopathic preparations be given to lessen the possible side effects of conventional immunisation?

Conventional vaccination may cause minor side effects such as redness, swelling and pain at the injection site. More serious side effects are rare. There is no scientific evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of homoeopathic remedies in preventing or lessening vaccine side effects.

Are all homoeopathy practitioners the same?

People seeking a consultation with a homoeopath should ensure that the person is accredited with the Australian Register of Homoeopaths (AROH), the national registration board for professional homoeopaths. Homoeopaths registered with the AROH are recognised by all major health insurance funds for rebates.

Web-based resources

Australian Homoeopathic Association

<http://www.homeopathyoz.org/> (accessed Dec 2009)

Better Health Channel. Fact sheet: Homeopathy.

Victorian Government Department of Human Services. 2009.

<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcArticles.nsf/pages/Homeopathy?OpenDocument> (accessed Dec 2009)

Better Health Channel. Fact sheet: Immunisation – common misconceptions. Victorian Government Department of Human Services. 2009.

http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcArticles.nsf/pages/Immunisation_common_misconceptions?open

(accessed Dec 2009)

British Homeopathic. Homeopathy and immunisation fact sheet.

http://www.britishhomeopathic.org/export/sites/bha_site/how_we_can_help/advice_sheets/immunisation_factsheet-2-1.pdf (accessed Dec 2009)

National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, National Institutes of Health. Clinical trials.

2009. <http://nccam.nih.gov/research/clinicaltrials/>

(accessed Dec 2009)

Australian Government Department of Health and Aging, Therapeutic Goods Administration. Homoeopathic preparations. 2007.

<http://www.tga.gov.au/docs/html/homeopat.htm> (accessed Dec 2009)

U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Department of Health and Human Services. Conditions under which homeopathic drugs may be marketed. March 1995.

<http://www.fda.gov/ICECI/ComplianceManuals/CompliancePolicyGuidanceManual/ucm074360.htm> (accessed

Dec 2009)

Scientific articles

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Ernst E. The attitude against immunisation within some branches of complementary medicine. *European Journal of Pediatrics* 1997;156:513-515.

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Sulfaro F, Fasher B, Burgess MA. Homoeopathic immunisation: what does it mean? *Medical Journal of Australia* 1994;161:305-307.

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edition. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Health and Aging, 2008.

<http://www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/Handbook-home> (accessed Dec

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