

My New Scientist

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Back to article](#)

Vaccination risks are 'too small to count'

25 September 1993 by [SUSAN KATZ MILLER](#), WASHINGTON DC
Magazine issue [1892](#). [Subscribe and save](#)

The risks of side effects from vaccines are exceptionally small, according to a report published last week by the US National Academy of Sciences. But, for many rare reactions, it is impossible to say exactly how small because the US system for monitoring vaccines contains 'inaccurate, poorly documented, or incomplete' data. 'Although we can't assign real numbers to many of the risks, in no case did we find these adverse effects to be common at all,' says Richard Johnston, a Yale University paediatrician who headed the panel.

The report was written by a panel convened by the academy's Institute of Medicine to determine which side effects are linked to vaccines. Russell Alexander, a panel member and professor of epidemiology at the University of Washington, says he is disappointed that the panel did not compare the risks of vaccination with the risks of going unvaccinated. That's a step that should be taken, he says.

Johnston says the 'biggest surprise' was evidence that tetanus and oral polio vaccine caused Guillain-Barre syndrome, a nerve disease that causes numbness and weakness in the limbs. One man in Australia came down with the disorder three times, each time after a tetanus shot. In Finland, when the nation changed from the killed form of polio vaccine, which is injected, to the live vaccine, which is swallowed, the incidence of the syndrome increased.

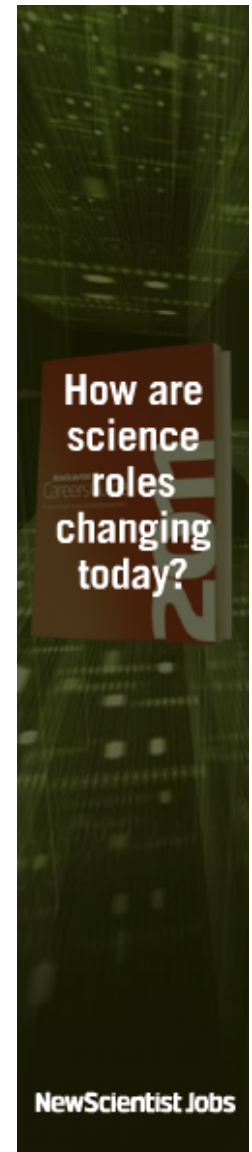
The panel discounted a causal link between diphtheria and tetanus vaccines and encephalopathy, infantile spasms and cot death. For many other adverse effects, the panel found that there was inadequate evidence to either accept or reject vaccines as a cause.

The present system for detecting adverse effects, which relies mainly on voluntary reports by doctors, is run by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). According to Joanne Hatem, who heads the Health Research Council, a group which urges greater vaccine safety: 'The subtext of the report is that the FDA and CDC have done a dismal job in following up and analysing the reported reactions.'

The vaccine safety report and the surveillance system were set up in 1986 in response to public concern. At that time, Congress also set up a compensation fund for deaths and illnesses caused by vaccines, paid for by a tax on vaccine sales. Last week's report, and an earlier one focusing on rubella and whooping cough vaccines, are intended to give guidance on which compensation claims are valid.

Responding to the report, the American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirmed 'its long-standing position that the benefits of immunisation far outweigh the risks'

ADVERTISEMENT



From issue [1892](#) of New Scientist magazine, page 9.

As a subscriber, you have unlimited access to our online archive.

Why not [browse past issues](#) of New Scientist magazine?

•  0 tweets
•  tweet

 **PRINT**  **SEND**  **SHARE**

If you would like **to reuse any content** from New Scientist, either in print or online, please [contact the syndication](#) department first for permission. New Scientist does not own rights to photos, but there are a [variety of licensing options](#) available for use of articles and graphics we own the copyright to.

[Back to article](#)

 **PRINT**  **SEND**  **SHARE**

ADVERTISEMENT