

Vaccination...

Our Best Shot for Normalcy



Dr Leong Ming Chern

Dr Leong Ming Chern strongly advocates vaccinating all children who have been included in the COVID immunisation programme i.e all those above the age of 12, at the time of writing.

He explains further:

When the world started rolling out the COVID-19 vaccinations early this year, understandably there was a lot of apprehension alongside the hope that it would prove effective in mitigating the pandemic.

As the science was eventually proven in practical widespread application, and governments started to push for vaccinations, confidence grew, and more people became accepting and understanding of the necessity to be vaccinated.

As of December 2021, 7.48 billion doses have been administered worldwide, with 3.2 billion fully vaccinated. This translates to 41% of the global population.

Is this a lot? Well, yes, and no.

YES, because it is quite commendable that we created these vaccines within 10 months or so, manufactured them in large quantities and distributed them to so many people in less than a year from first roll-out. Remember also that we had to deal with cold storage logistics for some vaccines.

And a resounding NO, because it is still not enough and with some 59% of the world unvaccinated, it still gives the SARS-CoV-2 virus much breathing space to mutate. Unfortunately, a good portion of these 59% include children under 12 (who are not yet included in the vaccination schedule).

Thankfully, adolescents (12 - 17 years) are now being vaccinated worldwide and here in Malaysia, we started this programme on 15 September.

A wise move indeed, as this is a highly sociable group, that also has the highest mobility - in usual circumstances, that is. We have to eventually open schools again, and get back to life as much as we have known it, for the sake of social, economic and educational reasons, and also for social sanity.

Since IJN started on this Phase 5 of paediatric vaccinations, we have administered more than 2,000 doses (as of December 2021), with about half of which for our patients. The others are those sent on by MOH and other private hospitals - special cases, including children with autism, asthma, high allergy and heart patients, among others.

As a Special PPV, IJN is well-equipped to handle any possible vaccination side effects for these cases. Contrary to initial fears, there is no major contraindications for COVID-19 vaccinations, instead they should be prioritised as they are high-risk groups.

I was pleasantly surprised that parents are very keen to have their children vaccinated - especially so those with comorbidities. This shows that awareness and knowledge, and to a large extent, their own experiences with the vaccination, have induced confidence in them.

This is further attested by the quick vaccination rate of this group which has seen some 80% of students 12 - 17 years old having received at least one dose in just over 3 weeks of the programme.



The children are also keen actually. With so much COVID-related information bandied about every day, our children are also very aware of the situation and they themselves are also keen for vaccination. For now, it is the key to resume as much normalcy as possible. The only resistance I have seen is the fear of needles, and you would be surprised that even older teenagers have meltdowns at the sight of the needle!

As for side effects, unlike an actual COVID-19 infection, the effects of vaccination are predictable and almost 100% manageable and treatable - if they do come down to that. Common side effects are similar to those experienced by adults, primarily injection site pain, fever, aches and fatigue, that last one to three days. The most concerning side effect - who are only given the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine so far in Malaysia - are myocarditis and pericarditis.

And even then, data reflects very low vaccine-related myocarditis of 30 and 8 in one million, for boys and girls respectively. Comparatively, if kids get COVID-19, the chances are 1 in 3000.

Therefore, we advise parents to watch out for post-vaccination prolonged fever, chest pains, shortness of breath and palpitations and seek medical advice if these appear. We also empower the children with this knowledge so they can self-monitor.

Meanwhile, there is not enough research to support the safety of these vaccinations for those under 12. We just need make sure those around these babies are vaccinated, mask-up, cut down on social gatherings and keep the kids home wherever possible.

If we talk about herd immunity, then this herd has to include the world's children. World data states that we have almost 2 billion kids under the age of 14. You can imagine how many of these cannot as yet be vaccinated. Add to this figure those who eligible who cannot access vaccination at the moment, and the potential for virus mutations, and you have scary figures.

So no, herd immunity is a pipe dream as the goal posts keep shifting. The best thing is to vaccinate all who are eligible as quickly as possible.

COVID-19 is today called the pandemic of the unvaccinated. Let us not include our children in this group. So set aside all prejudices, fears and hesitation and bring them in, while we sit tight and wait for good news that we can start vaccinating our 5 - 12 year-olds in Malaysia.