Vaccine Discussions in the Somali Community: A Review of FAQs in the Community

As with many communities, some Somali families may experience vaccine hesitation or deliberation due to concerns or misinformation in the community. While the approach to discussing vaccines with parents who are vaccine hesitant hold true in the Somali community, there are other considerations providers should consider. **Below are common questions and concerns that have come up in the community.**

1. What is the ingredient list for the vaccines that our family is receiving?

Many families are concerned about whether vaccines contain ingredients that are haraam or impermissible in Islam, including pork gelatin. **The majority of vaccines do not contain pork gelatin, but of the few that do contain pork gelatin, Islamic scholars have agreed that the chemical degradation that the gelatin undergoes is significant, making it permissible.** Additionally, it is permissible to use products that may contain small amounts of gelatin if there is risk associated with not doing so and if there are no other alternatives. **An example of an Islamic fatwa can be found here.**

2. Are there specific timelines by which my children should receive all their vaccines?

Refer families to the CDC vaccine schedule. There is also a new resource that lists vaccines translated into Somali. This can be helpful as families are able to associate vaccines with vaccine-preventable diseases. Forecasting vaccines has been shown to be helpful to Somali families that might be deliberating vaccines as it gives them time to think about the vaccines and consult with family/ other decision makers.

3. Can I space out vaccines or not give them according to the scheduled timeline?

This is a commonly asked question. While the ultimate goal is getting children protected against vaccine preventable illness, it is important to inform parents about the reasons for the vaccine schedule by focusing on protecting children before exposure and preventing possible chronic illness. Be honest that it is possible but not recommended to space out vaccines. This will breed trust and get children some level of protection for children whose families are deliberating.

4. Will delaying certain vaccines (MMR) protect my children from perceived side effects such as Autism or speech delays?

Developmental delay is a common concern of Somali parents who are hesitant to give the MMR vaccine. Many who are already hesitant might choose to wait until their child is speaking, or the age of 3. Because there is no evidence that the MMR vaccine causes delays and Autism, delaying this vaccine provides no protection. Be clear that there is no link between the MMR vaccine and Autism and offer to answer any questions. Many parents do come around to giving this vaccine, some even around the time the child goes to school. It's imperative to keep this dialogue going with the families. **A 2024 study regarding supportive interventions related to MMR vaccine coverage can be found here.**

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5. Do my children really need the COVID-19 vaccine? What are the side effects of this vaccine? Do these differ based on age?

We recommend focusing on the following key concepts: Children, like adults, benefit from getting the Covid vaccine as it protects against complications of Covid illness, hospitalization, and death. The Covid vaccine side effects in children are similar to those of routine childhood vaccines, and there is no evidence that this differs by age. We also recommend providers give any updates about data that come up or that parents might hear about in the news.

6. What is the role of a booster for the COVID-19 vaccine?

There has been confusion about the reason for Covid boosters and the actual need for multiple vaccines in the community. Educate parents about the new information that we have learned. We have used variations of the following explanation in our community education campaigns: when the Coronavirus changes, new variants emerge and circulate in the general population. As new variants emerge, Covid boosters ensure that we are protected against the variants. Boosters ensure that you are maximally protected against Covid.

7. Why do some vaccines such as the Influenza vaccine need to be taken every year? What if my body gets too reliant on this vaccine? What happens if one day it is no longer available?

Seasonal changes in the influenza virus, the difference between the flu and a severe common cold, and the reasoning for yearly vaccines can be confusing. Families are able to understand the concept of seasonal changes in the virus and the need for an annual vaccine if it is directly explained. We highly recommend reviewing how the flu differs from the common cold and the severe complications that can come from an influenza infection.

Some parents may recall a time when they themselves did not have access to vaccines and therefore worry about what would happen to their children's immune system if they get too reliant on something like a yearly vaccine to protect them. Explaining why this concept does not have a scientific basis in layman's terms is helpful to families. While it is less likely to lose access to vaccines in the US, it is possible but the history of vaccination does not cause “reliance” on a vaccine.

8. How can I bring up questions/safety concerns regarding vaccines with my provider?

Even if families do not feel comfortable directly asking this question to their healthcare provider, it is imperative for the provider to know this question is frequently on the minds of many patients. After providing a strong recommendation, invite the family to ask any questions they may have about the vaccine. Reaffirm the shared goal of keeping their children healthy and reassure families that you will answer all questions with openness and honesty. Some families may be hesitant to ask questions for fear of offending a provider; it is the provider's responsibility to create a safe space for these discussions to occur.

Regardless of the question or concern, providers should keep the following in mind:

- **Provide a firm recommendation for vaccines and invite questions.** The Somali community sees physicians as an authority figure, especially those with whom they have a trusted relationship. Giving a firm recommendation and answering questions openly and honestly helps set the stage for vaccine discussions.
- **Focus on the disease being prevented as well as the risks and benefits of vaccination.** Vaccine discussions may be more successful if the focus is on educating the parents and helping them make an informed decision about their child. When providers focus on an education versus a vaccine, which can be seen as possibly having ulterior motives, parents might be more receptive to the discussion as well as the recommendations.
- **Do not make vaccines a one-time discussion**. Vaccine education should be ongoing with routine checkups. Parents' thoughts, feelings, and reasons for declining vaccines may change over time. Use each visit as a check-in and continue to inquire about and offer vaccines.
- **It is important to engage with trusted religious leaders and healthcare professionals in the community to address any concerns and ensure informed decision-making.**