

# Every parents worst nightmare

knowledge & attitudes towards meningitis & vaccination

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## Introduction

In the past two decades the introduction of vaccines to control Hib disease, meningococcal serogroup C and some types of pneumococcal disease has resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of cases each year. Nevertheless, meningitis has not gone away, and meningitis and septicaemia continues to be a devastating disease, particularly affecting young children. A vaccine uptake rate of  $\geq 95\%$  is needed to protect the population<sup>1</sup>. However, following the change to the immunisation schedule in July 2008, the uptake of the Men C and Hib vaccines due at 13 months fell to as low as 80% in some parts of the country. While there is some evidence of improved uptake rates<sup>2</sup> there is a need to understand parental and health professionals attitudes towards vaccination and knowledge about meningitis to inform any health promotion initiatives. This is particularly important as there may be changes to the vaccination schedule to accommodate new vaccines (e.g., meningococcal B).

## Method

Telephone surveys using structured questionnaires between March/April 2013: (1) a nationally representative sample of parents (n = 350; 85% female) with one or more child under the age of two years; and (2) GPs (n= 100; 80% male) and practice nurses (n = 75; 96% female); 52% of the GPs and 86% of the practice nurses administer vaccines  $\geq$  once a week.



## Results

Parents were asked to recall the names of the vaccines in the primary childhood schedule	Vaccine	Percentage
	MMR	50
	BCG	35
	6:1	26
	MenC	21
	PCV	16
	HIB	16
	Other/Don't know	30

### Vaccine Uptake:

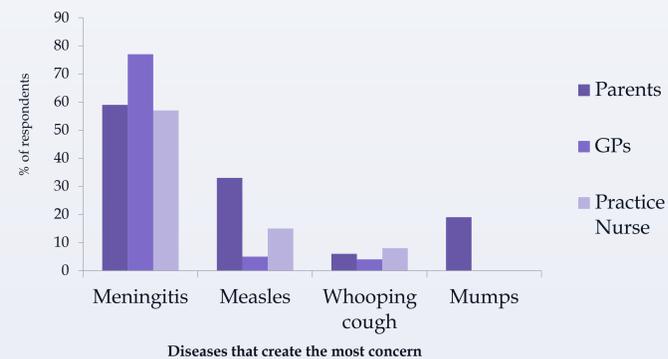
The majority (91%) of parents stated that their child/children were up to date with their immunisations. Of those with children old enough only 90% (n = 216) had taken their child for the vaccine scheduled at 12 months, and only 81% (n=203) had taken their child for the vaccine scheduled at 13 months. The child being unwell was given as the main reason for missing the 12 and 13 month appointments.

### “Where have you received the ‘best’ information about vaccines”:

Parents were most likely to say their GP (44%) and Public Health Nurse (35%). Only 10% mentioned the HSE booklet “Your Child’s Immunisation”

## Results contd.

Meningitis is the disease that creates the most worry for parents and health professionals.



Encouragingly more than half (53%) of parents were confident about recognising the early signs/symptoms of meningitis, but there was a poor awareness of the different bacterial causes of the disease; over half could not name a single type (58%), and a generally low level of knowledge of the different childhood vaccines. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this lack of knowledge, **over a third of parents (37%) mistakenly believed that the current vaccination schedule protects their child against all forms of meningitis.**

There was a high level of agreement amongst the Health Professionals that meningitis continues to pose a significant risk to children (GPs 75% Nurses 80%) and that more needed to be done to prevent the disease (73% and 76%). Reflecting this concern, the GPs and nurses would highly recommend the new vaccine against meningococcal serogroup B (98% and 99% respectively) but parents were generally more cautious: only 54% said they would avail of the vaccine when available.

## Conclusions

Meningitis creates a high level of concern for both parents and Health Professionals, yet some parents have ‘missed’ or ‘delayed’ completion of the immunisation schedule leaving their children unprotected at a period when they are most at risk from the disease. The findings indicate that parents need more information in order to recognise the importance of completing the immunisations on time, and to be fully aware of the ongoing risks of meningitis to their child.

The GP and Public Health Nurse remain the key people that parents turn to for advice and information, and these Health Professionals will be critical in ensuring uptake rates of the current immunisation schedule are improved and to promote the successful introduction of any new vaccine that protects against the most common type of bacterial meningitis.

## References

- WHO (2013) The guide to tailoring immunisation programmes. Copenhagen:WHO
- HPSC (2012) Summary immunisation uptake rates Q1 1999-Q3 2012

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