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Trump wants the MMR vaccine divided into three shots. Is that even possible?

Immunizations against measles, mumps and rubella aren't available as stand-alone shots. What's more, experts say there's no evidence to support breaking up the vaccine into three.

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— The measles-mumps-rubella vaccine has been given for decades in the U.S. as a single shot. Joe Raedle / Getty Images file

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By Erika Edwards

Dividing the combination measles-mumps-rubella vaccine into three separate shots would be likely to cost millions of dollars and take years to accomplish, vaccine experts say, making it impossible to follow President Donald Trump's [latest directive](#) to break up the immunizations and give them at three doctor's office visits.

The measles-mumps-rubella, or MMR, vaccine has been safely given for decades in the U.S. as a single shot. To reformulate individual vaccines, drugmakers would need to run new clinical trials to study the safety and efficacy of each one.

The MMR vaccine has long been a target of the anti-vaccine movement. One small research paper published in the mid-1990s suggested a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. It was subsequently retracted because of falsified data, and the doctor, Andrew Wakefield, lost his medical license.

Trump signs order to change child vaccine recommendations

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But the paper set into motion a cascade of fear in parents worldwide and led to [steady reductions in vaccination rates](#), including in the U.S.

The Trump administration has continued to focus on the possibility that MMR shots could be doing harm, even though [scores of studies](#) looking at millions of children overwhelmingly back up the safety and effectiveness of the MMR vaccine and have found no evidence for an autism link.

Dr. James Campbell, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Infectious Diseases, worried that parents may be left thinking that the MMR shot isn't safe because of the executive order. "We have decades and decades of experience using the MMR vaccine as a combined vaccine," he said.

Is there any scientific evidence – new or old – to support separating the MMR vaccine?

No.

“This is relatively easy for us as pediatricians to discuss with parents,” Campbell said, “because there is absolutely no evidence for the approach of separating them into separate injections.”

MMR shots are given in two doses, around age 1 and again at age 5. Together, they offer [97% protection](#) against measles and rubella, often for life, and they are 86% effective at preventing mumps.

[Trump has repeatedly](#) called for MMR shots to be separated, perplexing experts who say there’s simply no data to suggest it would be beneficial.

“We have an effective vaccine that has a proven record of safety, that’s effective in eradicating three diseases with very high morbidity and mortality in children,” said Asefeh Faraz Covelli, an associate professor at the George Washington University School of Nursing and a vaccine expert. “We should keep using it.”

Why were the shots combined in the first place?

The measles vaccine was introduced in 1963 and combined with vaccines to prevent mumps and rubella in 1971.

“Measles and mumps come from the same family of viruses, so it made sense to combine those two. Their transmission is fairly similar,” Faraz Covelli said.

The addition of the [rubella vaccine](#) was based upon need and determined to be a practical way to protect a lot of babies all at once. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 12.5 million cases of the illness in the mid-1960s. Tens of thousands of babies were born with severe birth defects from congenital rubella syndrome.

“We have not had congenital rubella in the United States for a very long time. God forbid it comes back,” Campbell said. But as vaccination rates fall, “the more likely [it is] that is going to happen. There is still rubella circulating in the world.”

The MMR combination was found to be safe and worked extremely well, and it could be given in a single shot instead of three. It simplified vaccination programs and reduced the number of needle sticks babies had to endure.

The MMR shot is now given in two doses. Separating them for the same level of protection would mean giving babies six different shots at six different doctor’s appointments.

[Studies have shown](#) that children are much likelier to get their [full rounds of recommended vaccinations](#) if they’re combined and offered at fewer appointments.

What would it take to get separate MMR vaccines in the U.S.?

Separate vaccines for measles, mumps and rubella aren’t licensed for use in the U.S.

Dr. Jesse Goodman, a professor of infectious diseases at Georgetown University and a former chief scientist at the Food and Drug Administration, said it would take a tremendous amount of effort for companies to rework the systems already in place.

“They would have to essentially make a new vaccine,” Goodman said, including showing the FDA enough evidence to support its use, going through the entire FDA approval process once again.

There is no indication that the drugmakers that make MMR vaccines are doing so.

“To date, there has been no published scientific evidence that shows any benefit in separating the combination MMR vaccine into three individual shots,” a spokesperson for Merck, which makes two of the MMR vaccines licensed in the U.S., said in an emailed statement. “Use of the individual components of combination vaccines increases the number of injections for the individual and may result in delayed or missed immunizations.”

GSK makes the third licensed MMR vaccine. A spokesperson said in an email that “there is no scientific evidence that separate measles, mumps, and rubella shots improve safety or efficacy compared to combined MMR.”

“We stand by the safety and effectiveness of our combination vaccines, which are backed by decades of global use and robust scientific evidence,” the spokesperson said.

Goodman also said the increase in costs would go beyond running new clinical trials: Companies “would have to redesign their production to end up with three different vaccines,” he said. The number of vials and needles required to fill the separated shots would triple. Storage and production facilities would need to expand. Such an undertaking would require millions of dollars at minimum.

Though vaccination rates have been declining, the shots are still widely accepted. [More than 92%](#) of kids get their MMR shots every year in the U.S.

“Right now, a manufacturer really doesn’t have the incentive to build a less convenient product to compete with a vaccine that has proven efficacy since 1971,” Faraz Covelli said.



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