



Doctors rail against weakening hepatitis B vaccine recommendation



U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (AP file)



By [Ben Mause](#) and [Karl Hille](#)

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WASHINGTON — The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices voted to approve new recommendations delaying the child [hepatitis B](#) vaccine for infants Friday, providing a win for the

Make America Healthy Again movement while troubling many health officials in Baltimore and across the nation.

If enacted, the new policies would have the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend delaying hepatitis B vaccines for lower-risk children until two months from birth, while emphasizing communication between doctor and parent before a vaccine is administered. Current CDC policy promotes vaccinations for newborns.

Members who supported the changes cited potential unknown harms from the vaccines, though they offered no direct data to back their concerns about the hepatitis B vaccines. Instead, they focused on contrasting America's current promotion of universal HBV vaccination for children with those of certain European countries that advocate an individual-based approach.

Before the vote, members and CDC subject-matter experts emphasized that, should the agency adopt them, the changes are not policy mandates. Parents can still opt for newborn vaccines.

"What I'm hearing is the logic of public health — which is focused on maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number," Dr. Robert Malone, the committee vice chair who supported the changes, said. "The counterbalance for that is the need to respect the rights of the individual to self-determination."

On the other hand, the new recommendation may make it harder for all patients to be treated equally, said Dr. Wilbur Chen, infectious disease specialist and vaccine researcher at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

He said hepatitis is more prevalent in populated parts of Maryland — Baltimore City, and Howard, Montgomery and Prince George's counties — than the national average. Delaying vaccination increases the likelihood that poor people and those without health insurance will not have their children vaccinated under the new recommendation, as they might miss follow-up appointments or face other barriers to care.

"We want to protect all people in Baltimore the same and not have it be just the well-to-do and people who have access that do well," Chen said. "We want to have vaccines for everybody, no matter their income. The people who lack access to health care are the people who are going to be hit by hepatitis B the hardest."

Hepatitis B is a viral liver disease that can be cured if caught early, but can also lead to a chronic illness with a significant risk of premature death, [according to the CDC](#). About half of the people with the disease do not know they have it, including pregnant women, and the disease can be transmitted to the baby during birth. The vaccine is required for all Maryland day care and elementary school children, according to the [Maryland Department of Health](#).

A majority of the vaccine panel voted for the updated recommendations over vehement objections from some members and advisers, who argued that the changes were unnecessary and potentially harmful.

"Thoughtful inquiry is always commendable," committee member Dr. Cody Meissner said before the vote. "But that inquiry should not be confused with baseless skepticism, which is what I think we're encountering here."

While the ACIP voted to approve the updated recommendations, final approval is in the hands of acting CDC Director Jim O’Neill.

Doctors from the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, American Medical Association and University of Maryland School of Medicine, however, cited years of data supporting the vaccine, which they say has saved millions of American lives since being recommended for all newborns in 1991.

“Infants infected with hepatitis B have a much greater risk of developing chronic hepatitis,” said Dr. Angela Ulrich, of the University of Minnesota. “We see that 90% of newborns who are infected at birth will develop a chronic hepatitis B infection, and 25% of those with a chronic infection will die prematurely from chronic liver disease, including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

“The decades of data that we reviewed from randomized trials, national safety systems, and long-term follow-ups show that the vaccine is safe at birth with only mild temporary and expected reactions,” Ulrich added. “The birth dose is also highly effective at preventing infection in infants, and that protection lasts over 35 years after completing the vaccine series. The birth dose recommendation has prevented over six million infections and nearly one million hospitalizations due to hepatitis B.”

Maryland Sen. Angela Alsobrooks was more vehement in her condemnation of the committee’s decision, as well as Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who oversees the CDC. Kennedy has instituted sweeping changes to the vaccine committee during his leadership at HHS, firing all 17 members in June. He previously pledged during his confirmation process that he would not make changes to the committee.

“Today is just the latest, and perhaps most dangerous, in a long string of actions by RFK Jr. intended to make Americans sicker,” Alsobrooks said in a statement. “Make no mistake: the Secretary and his sycophants are risking children’s lives all to satisfy their own cockamamie conspiracy theories. The federal government is supposed to improve American lives, not kill Americans.”

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services did not immediately respond to a request for comment.