

**Communicable Disease Epidemiology
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Information for King County Healthcare Providers Regarding Vaccine Hesitancy in the Somali Community – 22 September, 2011

In Spring 2011, several King County health care providers expressed concerns regarding vaccine hesitancy among members of the local Somali community. In response, Public Health – Seattle & King County conducted key informant interviews with local Somali community leaders to learn more about Somalis' attitudes, beliefs and practices regarding vaccination. A preliminary summary of the main issues we've identified and options for addressing the concerns expressed are provided below to help inform discussions about immunizations between health care providers and their Somali patients.

- 1. Some vaccines contain porcine gelatin, which is not Halal (not allowed according to Islamic teaching) because of its connection to pork.**
 - Not all vaccines contain porcine gelatin - **When possible, have available brands of vaccine that do not contain porcine gelatin.** The following vaccine brands do not contain porcine gelatin.

Antigen(s)	Brands of routine vaccines that do not contain porcine gelatin
DTaP	Infanrix (GSK), Daptacel (Sanofi Pasteur)
Hepatitis A	Havrix (GSK), Vaqta (Merck)
Hepatitis B	Engerix (GSK), Recombivax (Merck)
Hib	Pedvax Hib (Merck), ActHib (Sanofi Pasteur)
Influenza	Fluvirin (Novartis), Afluria (Merck)
Meningococcal (MCV4) (MPSV4)	Menactra (Sanofi Pasteur), Menveo (Novartis) Menomune (Sanofi Pasteur)
Pneumococcal (PCV) (PPSV)	Prennar 13 (Wyeth) Pneumovax (Merck)
Polio (IPV)	IPOL (Sanofi Pasteur)
Rotavirus	Rotarix (GSK), RotaTeq (Merck)
Combination vaccines	Pediarix (GSK), Pentacel (Sanofi Pasteur), Comvax (Merck), Kinrix (GSK)

NOTE: There are currently no porcine gelatin-free brands for MMR, MMR-V, varicella, or shingles vaccines.

- A letter from the World Health Organization (WHO) Eastern Mediterranean Office and international Islamic religious leaders states: ***“The Gelatin formed as a result of the transformation of the bones, skin and tendons of a judicially impure animal is pure, and it is judicially permissible to eat it”***. A PDF file of the WHO letter is attached. This letter may reassure some patients about receiving gelatin-containing vaccines. A number of Somali refugees cannot read English or Somali; having a Somali interpreter read the letter to patients may be effective.
2. **Members of the Somali community generally do not believe in preventive health care:** They go to a health center or hospital only when they’re sick. Many Somalis have a strong religious belief that Allah will protect them, and that if they get ill, Allah has decided it is their fate.
 - **Use an analogy familiar to the community to explain the message of prevention:** e.g., using mosquito nets or insect repellent to protect against/prevent mosquito bites that may cause malaria and other illnesses.
 - **Vaccines are viewed as potentially important for the elderly, children, and pregnant women.** Most families will vaccinate their children if it’s necessary for school.
 3. **Some members of the Somali community are concerned about a perceived higher rate of autism** and autism-like disorders among Somali children in the U.S. than in Somalia, and a number of Somalis believe vaccines are to blame. A study conducted in 2008 by the Minnesota Department of Health found that Somali children were over-represented in Minnesota Public Schools’ early education programs for children with autism spectrum disorders. It is not known whether Somali children actually have higher rates of autism than other children; CDC and the Minnesota Department of Health continue to investigate the issue. For more information about autism in the Somali community in Minnesota, see www.health.state.mn.us/ommh/projects/autism/index.cfm
 - The Somali American Autism Foundation (www.saafmn.org/) has written materials on vaccines and autism in English and Somali that cite the absence of evidence for a link between vaccines and autism (<http://www.saafmn.org/AUTISM.html>). Written materials may not work for Somalis who do not read their language, use of an interpreter who can read the materials may be useful.
 4. **Many Somalis do not get the influenza vaccine because they don’t believe in the seriousness of influenza.** There is no word for “influenza” or “flu” in the Somali language—the closest translation is *“hargabka”* which means “cough” or “cold”. Flu illness is believed to be mild and temporary, so a vaccine for flu doesn’t make sense to a number of Somalis.
 - **Somalis generally trust healthcare providers - talk with the patient about the symptoms and severity of influenza and who is especially at risk for flu-related complications** A dialogue is likely to be more effective than written materials, which may not be read.

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