Autism POVs: COVID Vaccine Safety

This is Autism Points of View by Autism Speaks
I'm Felipe Maya

In this episode we'll be talking about the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines with Dr. Stephen Morris.

Dr. Stephen Morris
I am Stephen Morris. I'm a faculty infectious disease physician, adult infectious disease physician at the University of Miami, and I practice at the University of Miami hospital and Jackson Memorial Hospital. And I'm also a father of two girls, one of which has autism.

Dr. Stephen Morris
She was diagnosed a little less than a year ago. But I think we had, you know, some concerns with speech delay and, and things for a few months before that. And, you know, it was really once we started getting her engaged with speech and occupational therapy, that some of the behavioral, you know, features of the disorder started to come out, and then we got the diagnosis. But, you know, we've been through many of the same hurdles that everyone on this podcast, who's listening, this podcast has been through. And so, to everybody out there, you know, I know it's hard, but keep doing what you're doing. You know, your kids will remember the rest of their lives.

Dr. Morris is involved in the clinical trials for the Moderna COVID vaccine and says he wants to help spread accurate and important information about the vaccines to the autism community as an expert and as a parent.

Dr. Stephen Morris
I didn't receive any compensation for this activity. I, you know, I received some support from the clinical trial with Moderna that I was involved in, but I didn't get any of the money, it was all to my, my hospital so that I could be redirected from my usual clinical duties to help the trial. So, you know, I really sort of stand behind how I feel about this without any influence. So, you know, what I'll tell you is how exactly I feel after reviewing all of the data. And it's not how, you know, the official policy of UM, or Jackson or anywhere else, but I don't think any of my colleagues who are reviewed everything would disagree with me. You know, I'm, preliminarily a adult infectious disease specialist, but I think with my involvement with the, with the trials, and with the COVID Prevention Network, you know, I feel qualified to review the pediatric data, which I've done and really give you guys my opinions.

Dr. Morris' main message is that that getting the vaccine will keep yourself and those around you safe from COVID's major symptoms.

Dr. Stephen Morris
Well, I think the first thing I want to say as sort of a public service announcement is that, you know, we're in the year 2022. And nobody needs to suffer with getting, you know, being sick with COVID. And nobody needs to face tough choices about whether or not to get themselves or their kids vaccinated alone. And your health care providers, please stand ready to discuss with you your individual concerns and help discuss the data and how it may impact your

decision. So, you know, yes, it's easy to access a lot of information on the internet, but we are always here to help you distill all that and really talk to you about your concerns. I think the main thing is that, you know, I don't tend to focus on do this to make the community a healthier place, I believe in that myself, but I know, people want to protect themselves and their kids more than anything. And so what I would say is getting the vaccine will help protect your kid from getting sick and missing school and you may be missing work, it will prevent them from being hospitalized and being admitted, for a ventilator and, and death compared to not getting the vaccine. And, as I said, importantly, it'll prevent you from complications of prolonged symptoms, you know, there's adults that I've seen, who still are barely able to walk or unable to do anything beyond, you know, being at rest, no exercise at all, because of their prolonged symptoms. And that's happened even in people with mild infection.

Dr. Morris says that while the vaccine may not prevent you from getting COVID-19, it can protect you from severe symptoms that could lead to hospitalization.

Dr. Stephen Morris
it's really staggering the how effective these vaccines are preventing people from being sick enough to get admitted to the hospital. And especially if anything worse than that, they looked at about 400, CDC looked at about 400 Kids in the 5 to 11 group that were hospitalized during Omicron. This was the wave just after sort of these kids became eligible. And of all the kids that were admitted 87% were unvaccinated. At least a third had no underlying medical conditions. And almost one out of five kids who came into the hospital had to go to the intensive care unit. So they are still getting sick, even kids that have no previous, you know, health condition, but much more likely to get admitted if you're unvaccinated. And so you can really see the excellent protection from this.

With all the news about the various COVID-19 variants, Dr. Morris assures that the vaccines are effective against the new variants.

Dr. Stephen Morris
People sometimes scratch their heads and say, Well, I'm reading a bit all these terrible percentage protection rates of these vaccines against the new viruses. How does this work? And so I think, you know, it's, it's important to talk about that, and I think that's maybe a myth that we haven't talked about yet is that the vaccines that were made in 2020, don't protect against the new viruses. All of the percentages that you see, you have to take for a grain of salt, because it all depends when the study was happening, we know that the newer, the viruses there Omicron, and later, sort of the 2022 COVID. There tend to evade antibodies from previous infection or vaccination. And also, at least for adults, you know, there's this waning of immunity that happens over time. And that's why you know, with all this in mind, people who are studying and tracking COVID, and then the vaccines have really focused the goal more on preventing hospitalizations and deaths. Some might say, there's really only one good way to prevent getting infected. And that's what social distancing and masking but, you know, we all know life must go on, no one's perfect. Our kids go to school with other kids. And you know, we all know what that means. And, you know, the most important thing is that from all of the data, including the recent variants, the ability of people to mount a protective response with the cells of their immune system, that was something that certain types of white blood cells that recognize infection remains excellent, you know, even when our immune system was exposed to the older viruses or the vaccines based on the older viruses, and so it's these white blood had cells that really prevent you from being sick, even if you get infected, because they sort of call defenses to the lungs, where they circulate to, you know, even if the virus gets in, you know, to our nose and mouth. And so you know, if you get the vaccine, even if you're, you're getting a vaccine based

on an older virus, you should feel pretty good about the protection that you or your kids have, from severe disease, because their immune system has been taught how to recognize it, and how to deal with it quickly.

In 2021, Autism Speaks ran a 2-week Rapid Needs Assessment in Florida to find out why autistic communities were hesitant to get the COVID vaccine and it found that the primary reason for being hesitant was the myth that the vaccines were rushed, and thus, not safe.

Dr. Stephen Morris
Yes, they just started development in January 2020. But the technology has been studied for over a decade, with some older, you know, not older, but viruses that have been studied longer, like HIV, Ebola ,MERS, I mean, we've used this technology to study it for a long time. So in the case of the the trials, you know, the federal government stepped in and really got rid of a few of the roadblocks, the first of which they sort of guaranteed the funding upfront for all of these companies who are developing the vaccine to really start planning and funding and getting all phases of the trial ready to go. So that there was no delay from one to the next. And then they coordinated, you know, all of the outcomes that we measured and the oversight, you know, both with the FDA and with independent observers, so that as soon as we got through that period of time when almost all of the bad things that could happen did that if all of the safety data was reviewed and favorable that we could start the next phase, you know, the phase two or the phase three trial while we were still collecting data, you know, preventing infections and hospitalizations and also for safety events, you know, from the initial studies. And so this overlapping period, it really doesn't collect any less follow up, you know, data about bad things happening or good things happening, it just does it in a way that maybe gets to the finish line a little bit sooner.

The other reasons participants reported hesitancy in getting the vaccine was that they did not trust the government or the vaccines. There is so much misinformation online about COVID and the vaccines - Dr. Morris brought up the myth that the vaccines can change a person's DNA.

Dr. Stephen Morris
And so we can say with confidence that it's safe, and that doesn't change people's DNA. You know, 10s of 1000s, maybe even hundreds of 1000s of people have been involved in these trials.

This type of vaccine mRNA had been studied for over a decade, no evidence of this has ever been found. And on a very basic biology level, the human body doesn't really have the capacity to convert RNA, back to DNA, which your body sort of stores as the blueprint for genetic information, and we can't, you know, take the RNA from the vaccine, and it can't be inserted into your DNA. But because of the intense public concern, they did more studies, both in in the petri dish and studying real patients. And there's not been any evidence in many people study that these vaccines can change people's DNA. So that shouldn't be a concern.

I know, the concern is that they don't trust the trials, and they and people don't trust a lot of things. But I hope that, again, no matter what our ideological differences are, between me and anyone else who's listening, that we would all have one commonality, which is that we would always want the best for our kids, we would never do anything that would be more likely or even reasonably likely to harm them, but rather to protect them. And so putting all this together with,

you know, what I've been trained to do. And looking at all the data, you know, the choice was clear, and still is clear to me that vaccination is, is the right move, both for their current health and their future health.

Dr. Morris, made sure to explain that the pandemic is not over and COVID hasn't gone away and likely won't anytime soon. There are still many cases in the US, many of these cases are being recorded, but many aren't.

Dr. Stephen Morris
I think one major myth that I think we need to dispel right away, which maybe is getting slightly more media attention now than in previous weeks or months, is COVID is really not gone. And it's really still very much here, and it still affects kids, you know, in, in looking at things for this podcast, you know, they've diagnosed almost 14 million cases in kids, and it's now almost 20% of all the cases are kids. And that includes, like 68,000 cases in the last week. And I think everyone can agree, this is probably a huge undercounting, right, because everybody who's doing at home rapid tests, you know, it's up to that person to report it to the Health Department, which hardly anybody ever does. So, you know, we're talking about a lot of miss school and workdays and worse, so, it's still very much here.

I can tell you that you do not want your kids to have this illness, they may have temporary symptoms from the vaccine, but getting these kids through the real thing is they are miserable. And especially the ones who have trouble expressing themselves or, you know, controlling their impulses controlling their behavior. It's tough. And I would not wish that on any, any parents. So, you know, definitely keep that in mind.

Dr. Morris made sure to also talk about how when someone gets COVID, there is a high chance it can spread to others in their household and beyond. Especially with autistic children who may have a whole network of support professionals.

Dr. Stephen Morris
I think about our fearless therapists who work so closely with our kids. You know, we have speech therapists, occupational therapists, and then at the center where my child goes, she gets sort of a rotating group of, you know, BCBAs and other therapists. And, you know, they're also taking care of other kids. So you can see the potential of excessive exposure. And so I think, you know, kit, and then there's kids in general going to school, I mean, I think it's, it's going to be nearly impossible for parents of school aged children or school aged children themselves to avoid the virus, and particularly because we have that close contact, prolonged, you know, interactions with the therapists. I think it's important, you know, both as far as protecting our kids, but also our therapists. And again, the kids that they, they help, I think it's very important.

I'd like to thank Dr. Morris for being a part of this episode and thank you for listening to this episode of Autism Points of View. To get resources related to this episode, visit our website at autismspeaks.org/podcast. And make sure to subscribe to Autism Points of View wherever you listen to podcasts to get new episodes as soon as they're available. This episode was written and produced by myself and Vijay Vasudevan and edited by Justin Propper. I'm Felipe Maya, thanks for listening.