

Experts urge vaccination drive to save lives

[Lebanon News](#) | 01:22 PM, Feb 24 Updated

By Brooke Anderson - The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Many people don't know the importance of vaccinations – until they become sick with an illness that could have been prevented. To fight this trend, a dedicated group of Lebanese doctors is working to spread awareness of what they say is a global problem that has developed due to a lack of awareness among patients and even many doctors. “A lot of people don't understand the value of vaccinations,” says Faysal al-Kak, a gynecologist and a senior lecturer in public health at the American University of Beirut.

Through lectures, pamphlets and word of mouth recommendations, Kak and several other doctors are working to raise awareness about the importance of vaccinations for things such as flu, tetanus, certain types of cancer and a range of other preventable infections. The campaign focuses especially on women and the elderly, who don't tend to pay attention to their own needed vaccinations the way parents of schoolchildren do.

“The majority of people will do the compulsory vaccines – rubella, mumps and measles – for schoolchildren. The problem is when it comes to adults,” he says. “If they're not vaccinated, they risk infection.”

Vaccines have long been shown to be safe, effective and sustainable, not to mention affordable, costing around \$10 per shot on average. The vaccine typically contains an agent that resembles the disease it's designed to prevent, which in some cases can cause a mild illness that lasts one to two days. By doing this, the agent prompts the body's immune system to recognize and remember the disease so that it can destroy it during future encounters.

The fee and the momentary prick of the needle is a small price to pay for something that can prevent a range of illnesses including cervical cancer, the second most common form of cancer for women (although the HPV vaccination costs significantly more at around \$100 per shot).

The efficacy of vaccinations is reflected clearly in statistics. According to the Center for Disease Control, the United States' public health institute, the U.S. saw 763,094 cases of measles and 552 deaths from the disease in 1958. By 2008, there were only 64 suspected cases in the whole country. The smallpox vaccine developed in the 1700s has nearly eradicated the disease throughout the world.

Yet it wasn't until recently that members of the medical community began actively promoting vaccinations by publishing in medical journals and engaging in awareness campaigns. Despite these recent efforts, patients as well as doctors continue to forgo the simple medical procedure.

There are several reasons for this. Sometimes people simply aren't aware of what's available, don't understand how important it is or else worry that the vaccination will be harmful. A 1998

study in the medical journal Lancet linked autism to vaccines, and, although the paper was fully retracted in 2010, concerns still linger among those who aren't aware of all the facts.

Pregnant women tend to be particularly averse to being vaccinated, despite their immune systems being more vulnerable to easily preventable diseases such as flu.

Anwar Nassar, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at AUB Medical Center and acting chairman of the department, says many of the prenatal patients who are transferred to him haven't had the necessary vaccinations because their previous doctor hadn't even offered them.

"I have all of my patients vaccinated," Nassar says.

He recalls two particularly severe cases in the past couple of years in which unvaccinated prenatal patients at AUBMC had to go to the intensive care unit because they had caught the flu.

Luckily, both women made full recoveries, but he points to a 2011-12 AUB survey that found only 30 percent of prenatal patients were receiving their flu vaccinations. He hopes that next year's follow-up study will show an improvement.

He is also a champion of the latest inoculation discovery against HPV that became available in 2006. Despite some critics saying more time is needed to test it and observe the side effects, Nassar makes a simple and compelling case for it: "This is the first time there's a vaccine that protects against cancer."

LSOG 2014