Rotavirus vaccine: Safe and effective

By ACSH Staff — May 14, 2013

Before rotavirus vaccines were on the market, the disease caused more than 200,000 annual emergency room visits, 55,000 to 70,000 hospitalizations and 20 to 60 child deaths in the United States alone, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [1]. Rotavirus causes severe diarrhea and is responsible for an estimated half a million deaths of children under 5 worldwide each year.

But the vaccine does pose its own risk of intussusception, a bowel problem where the intestines become telescoped together. Now researchers have put a figure on that risk, and report that it’s minuscule.

Even if every child eligible for the vaccine received it, only 33 would develop the bowel condition each year, Penina Haber, MPH, of the CDC, and colleagues write in Pediatrics [2]. In a worst-case scenario, for every 100,000 doses administered, 1.36 children would develop intussusception. With treatment, nearly all infants who develop intussusception fully recover, generally without surgery, the CDC says [3].

ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross said, Given the fact that rotavirus infection is such a major scourge in the less-developed regions, it is comforting to see these data, confirming again the lack of serious side effects from the vaccine. That being said, the withdrawal of the original vaccine in the 1990s due to the rare bowel complication almost certainly led to many more sick and dead than might ever have occurred due to the vaccine.