Measles-Containing Vaccines and Febrile Seizures in Children Age 4 to 6 Years

AUTHORS: Nicola P. Klein, MD, PhD, Edwin Lewis, MPH, Roger Baxter, MD, Eric Weintraub, MPH, Jason Glanz, PhD, Allison Nalwany, PhD, Lisa A. Jackson, MD, MPH, James Nordin, MD, MPH, Tracy Lieu, MD, MPH, Edward A. Belongia, MD, and Bruce Fireman, MA

Kaiser Permanente Vaccine Study Center, Oakland, California; Immunization Safety Office, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia; Kaiser Permanente Colorado, Denver, Colorado and Department of Epidemiology, Colorado School of Public Health, Aurora, Colorado; Kaiser Permanente Northwest, Portland, Oregon; Group Health Research Institute, Seattle, Washington; HealthPartners Research Foundation, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Center for Child Health Care Studies, Department of Population Medicine, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Institute and Harvard Medical School, and Division of General Pediatrics, Children’s Hospital Boston, Boston, Massachusetts; and Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation, Marshfield, Wisconsin

KEY WORDS
measles, varicella, seizures, vaccine, fever

BACKGROUND: In the United States, children receive 2 doses of measles-mumps-rubella vaccine (MMR) and varicella vaccine (V), the first between ages 1 to 2 years and the second between ages 4 to 6 years. Among 1- to 2-year-olds, the risk of febrile seizures 7 to 10 days after MMRV is double that after separate measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) and varicella vaccines. This study provides reassurance that MMRV and separately administered MMR and varicella were not associated with increased risk of febrile seizures among 4- to 6-year-olds.

WHAT’S KNOWN ON THIS SUBJECT: Febrile seizure risk 7 to 10 days after measles-mumps-rubella-varicella (MMRV) is double that of separate measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) and varicella vaccines among 1-year-olds. Whether MMRV or MMR and varicella affect febrile seizure risk among 4- to 6-year-olds has not been reported.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS: Using Vaccine Safety Datalink data, we examined risk for febrile seizures after measles-containing vaccines. This study provides reassurance that MMRV and separately administered MMR and varicella were not associated with increased risk of febrile seizures among 4- to 6-year-olds.

RESULTS: From 2006 through 2008, 86 750 children received MMRV; from 2000 through 2008, 67 438 received same-day MMR + V. Seizures were rare throughout days 0 to 42 without peaking during days 7 to 10. There was 1 febrile seizure 7 to 10 days after MMRV and 0 after MMR + V. Febrile seizure risk was 1 per 86 750 MMRV doses (95% confidence interval, 1 per 3 426 441, 1 per 15 570) and 0 per 67 438 MMR + V doses (1 per 18 282).

CONCLUSIONS: This study provides reassurance that MMRV and MMR + V were not associated with increased risk of febrile seizures among 4- to 6-year-olds. We can rule out with 95% confidence a risk greater than 1 febrile seizure per 15 500 MMRV doses and 1 per 18 000 MMR + V doses. Pediatrics 2012;129:809–814

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The combination measles-mumps-rubella-varicella (MMRV) vaccine was licensed by the US Food and Drug Administration in 2005. MMRV was subsequently recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) in 2006, with recommended doses at 1 to 2 years and 4 to 6 years of age, at which time the ACIP stated a preference for its use over separate measles-mumps-rubella vaccine (MMR) and varicella vaccine (V) administrations.

After the licensure of the MMRV and ACIP recommendation, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted near real-time surveillance for prespecified safety outcomes after MMRV by using diagnostic code data of the Vaccine Safety Datalink (VSD) in a rapid cycle analysis (RCA). At the time, VSD consisted of managed care organizations sharing data on ~9 million members annually. In 2008, MMRV RCA safety monitoring detected a possible increased risk for seizures after receipt of MMRV. Subsequent studies confirmed that among toddlers 12 to 23 months old, ages when the risk for febrile seizure peaks, measles-containing vaccines were associated with elevated risk of fever and febrile seizure and MMRV was associated with an ~2-fold increased risk of fever and febrile seizures occurring 7 to 10 days after MMRV compared with separately administered MMR + V. One additional febrile seizure occurred for every 2300 doses of MMRV administered instead of separate MMR + V in 1-year-old children. This finding led to the CDC’s 2010 recommendation that while either MMRV or MMR + V may be administered to 1- to 2-year-olds receiving their first doses, families without a strong preference for MMRV should receive MMR + V.

MMR administered as a second dose to 4- to 6-year-old children has not been reported to have an association with an increased risk for febrile seizures. Whether either MMRV or MMR + V is associated with an increased risk for febrile seizures among children aged 4 to 6 years has not been previously investigated. The aim of this study was to assess the risk for febrile seizures after MMRV and MMR + V administration among children aged 4 to 6 years, ages when the risk for febrile seizure is much lower than that for toddlers.

**METHODS**

**Study Population**

This was a cohort study in which children aged 48 to 83 months who were members of the 7 participating VSD sites between January 2000 through October 2008 and who received MMRV (Merck & Co), separately administered, same-day MMR (Merck & Co, Inc, West Point, PA), or MMR or V administered alone were eligible for study inclusion. We defined a postvaccination seizure event as the first instance during the 42 days after a measles- or varicella-containing vaccine of The International Classification of Diseases, 9th Revision (ICD-9) codes 345* (epilepsy) or 780.3* (convulsion) in the emergency department or hospital. We identified postvaccination medically attended outpatient fever events by using ICD-9 code 780.6 (fever and other physiologic disturbances of temperature regulation) as previously described. We included all years 2000–2008 for seizure events because seizures were rare in this age group. However, we limited investigations of outpatient fever visits to the years 2006–2008 to minimize the potential impact of changes in outpatient coding practices over time and because those were the years during which both MMRV and MMR + V were available. For both seizure and fever outcomes, we included events during the 42 days postvaccination to be consistent with earlier studies. Only postvaccination events that occurred >42 days after a previous seizure or fever event, respectively, were included.

**Medical Record Review**

Because our previous study among 12- to 23-month-olds found increased risk of febrile seizures 7 to 10 days after MMR or MMRV, the primary analyses in the current study focused on febrile seizures occurring during the 7- to 10-day postvaccination risk period. We therefore reviewed the electronic medical record of seizures occurring 7 to 10 days after vaccination with MMRV or MMR + V to assess whether the seizures were febrile seizures. We accepted as a case a physician diagnosis of febrile seizure.

**Statistical Methods**

Our primary analysis examined risk of febrile seizures during the 7- to 10-day postvaccination period. To allow comparisons with the previous analysis among 12- to 23-month-olds, we also assessed rates of seizures (electronically identified) and outpatient fever visits during postvaccination days 0 to 42. We estimated the incidence of confirmed febrile seizures per 100,000 doses during 7 to 10 days after MMRV administration and used the 95% Poisson confidence interval for the observed count of confirmed febrile seizures to calculate a confidence interval for febrile seizure incidence. We compared the postvaccination fever rates by using Poisson regressions with adjustment for vaccine exposure, VSD site, age, year, and influenza season as previously defined.
This study had 80% power to detect a relative risk (RR) of 8.5 (2-sided $\alpha = .05$) for MMRV versus MMR + V during the 7- to 10-day risk interval. For adequate power to detect an RR of 2, we would need a much larger study population (ie, 1.2 million doses per group) because the background rate of febrile seizures is very low in this age group. However, the low background rate implies that we would have good power to detect a substantial absolute risk of febrile seizures after measles-containing vaccines. For the study population available, post hoc calculations indicated that if the true background rate of febrile seizure in this age group was really as low as 1 per 1100 person years, then we had 80% power to rule out an absolute risk equal to or higher than 1 per 15 570 doses of MMRV. We used SAS version 9.1 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC) for all analyses.

**RESULTS**

The study population included 86 750 children aged 4 to 6 years inclusive who were vaccinated with MMRV between January 2006 and October 2008 and 67 438 vaccinated with MMR + V between January 2000 and October 2008. In addition, from January 2000 to October 2008, 479 311 children received MMR alone and 80 985 received V vaccine alone.

Overall, there were very few seizures identified by ICD-9 codes in the electronic data after measles-containing vaccines (Table 1) and no seizure peak during postvaccination days 7 to 10 or 0 to 42 was evident (Fig 1). Based on the codes in the electronic data, incidence of electronically identified seizures 7 to 10 days after MMRV, MMR + V or MMR alone did not differ significantly from each other; although rates were higher after MMRV (Table 1).

Outpatient fever visits are shown graphically in Fig 2. No peak in fever visits during days 7 to 10 after MMRV, MMR, or V alone was apparent. Outpatient fever visits 7 to 10 days were not significantly higher after MMR + V than after MMR alone, although there was a trend in that direction ($P = .09$; Table 2).

Electronic medical record review of the 4 post-MMRV seizures during days 7 to 10 revealed that 2 individuals were diagnosed with afebrile seizures and 1 record was considered improbable as it was unclear as to whether fever or an

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**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-Vaccination Days</th>
<th>MMRV, N=86 750 Doses</th>
<th>MMR + Varicella, N=67 438 Doses</th>
<th>MMR, N= 479 311 Doses</th>
<th>Varicella, N= 80 985 Doses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rate/10 000 Doses (Number Events)</td>
<td>Rate/10 000 PY (95% CI)</td>
<td>Rate/10 000 Doses (Number Events)</td>
<td>Rate/10 000 PY (95% CI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–10</td>
<td>0.5 (4)</td>
<td>42.1 (11.5–107.8)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0–49.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–42</td>
<td>2.2 (19)</td>
<td>18.8 (11.3–29.4)</td>
<td>1.5 (10)</td>
<td>12.7 (6.1–23.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**FIGURE 1**

Postvaccination seizures among 4- to 6-year-olds by vaccine received, VSD study population 2000–2008.
acute seizure had occurred. Thus, only 1 febrile seizure diagnosis was confirmed, and the absolute risk for febrile seizure 7 to 10 days after MMRV was 1 febrile seizure for 86 750 doses (95% confidence interval [CI], 1 per 3 426 441, 1 per 15 570) or 1.2 febrile seizures per 100 000 doses of MMRV (Table 3). The upper limit of the 95% CI indicates that we can rule out that the risk 7 to 10 days after MMRV is no higher than 1 febrile seizure for approximately every 15 500 doses. Similarly, we can rule out that the risk for febrile seizures 7 to 10 days after MMR + V is no higher than 1 febrile seizure per 18 282 doses of same-day, separately administered MMR + V.

**DISCUSSION**

Based on >86 000 doses of MMRV administered to 4- to 6-year-olds, we found no evidence of an elevated febrile seizure risk during the 6 weeks post vaccination. We examined absolute risk for febrile seizures 7 to 10 days after MMRV and MMR + V and our results demonstrate that among 4- to 6-year-olds, we can rule out an absolute risk of >1 febrile seizure per 15 500 doses of MMRV, even if we assume that all the risk for febrile seizures during days 7 to 10 after MMRV was due entirely to the vaccine. For the 7 to 10 days after vaccination, we can similarly rule out an absolute risk greater than 1 febrile seizure per 18 000 doses.
of MMR + V. Due to the small number of seizure events during days 0 to 42 and 7 to 10 (~1/10th as high than that seen in 12- to 23-month-olds), our analyses had limited power to assess the relative risk of seizures after MMRV when compared with seizures after MMR + V. This study did have adequate power, however, to rule out a substantial absolute risk for febrile seizures after MMRV and MMR + V. To our knowledge, this is the first study to evaluate the risk of febrile seizures after MMRV or MMR + V among 4- to 6-year-old children. These results provide reassuring evidence that neither MMRV nor MMR + V appears to be associated with an increased risk of postvaccination febrile seizures in this age group.

A limited number of studies have evaluated the risk of febrile seizures after MMR alone in 4- to 6-year-olds. None have specifically evaluated for the risk of febrile seizures during the 7- to 10-day postvaccination risk interval. Davis et al.9 observed that postvaccination day postvaccination risk interval. Davis et al.9 observed that postvaccination fever rates between 4- and 6-year-old children. These results provide reassuring evidence that neither MMRV nor MMR + V appears to be associated with an increased risk of postvaccination febrile seizures in this age group.

REFERENCES

4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). Update: recommendations from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) regarding

CONCLUSIONS

We found no evidence that MMRV or MMR + V is associated with an elevated risk of febrile seizures among 4- to 6-year-olds during the 6 weeks after vaccination. At most, even if these vaccines were responsible for all febrile seizures that occur 7 to 10 days after immunization, there would only be 1 febrile seizure for every 15 500 doses of MMRV or 1 febrile seizure for every 18 000 doses MMR + V administered.

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