

NEWSLETTER

The Morning

Covid Shots for Children

Much of the world has decided that most young children don't need to receive Covid booster shots. The U.S. is an outlier.



By David Leonhardt

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Much of the world has decided that most young children do not need to receive Covid booster shots. It's true in Britain, France, Japan and Australia.

Some countries, like India, have gone further. They say that otherwise healthy children do not need even an initial Covid vaccination. In Germany, public health experts don't recommend vaccines for any children, including teenagers, unless they have a medical condition.

Scientists in these countries understand that Covid vaccines are highly effective. But the experts have concluded that the benefits for children often fail to outweigh the costs.

The benefits are modest because children are extremely unlikely to become seriously ill from Covid and are less likely to transmit the virus than an adult is. The costs include the financial price of mass vaccination, the possibility that a shot's side effects will make a child sick enough to miss school, the tiny chance of more serious side effects and the inherent uncertainty about long-term effects.

The U.S. — as American readers have probably realized by this point in the newsletter — is a global outlier. The C.D.C. urges booster shots for all children six months and older.

Yet the recommendation has failed to accomplish much. Instead, most American parents have chosen to overrule the C.D.C. Only about 40 percent of children under 12 have been vaccinated against Covid, and only about 5 percent are up to date on their boosters.

This situation makes for a case study of the shortcomings in U.S. Covid policy: A strict approach to a nuanced issue has backfired, fostering skepticism of scientific expertise while doing little to improve public health. Dr. Francis Collins, the retired head of the National Institutes of Health, acknowledged the larger problem last year when he said that experts erred during the pandemic by taking a "very narrow view of what the right decision is."

Monthslong school closures that harmed student learning were one example. Extended mask mandates that many people ignored were another. A continuing C.D.C. recommendation that conflicts with international practice — and that most Americans have dismissed — has become yet another.

What's reasonable?

Dr. Sandro Galea, the dean of the Boston University School of Public Health, recently published a book making a detailed version of this argument. The book is titled, “Within Reason.” During the pandemic, as Galea told me, health experts sometimes adopted “an illiberal ideology.” This ideology imagined people as robots who existed merely to minimize the chances of contracting a virus.

In reality, as Galea pointed out, society regularly decides that some amount of additional safety isn't worth it. Car drivers and passengers would be safer if they wore helmets, for instance, but who wears a helmet in a car?

In the case of Covid, there are indeed benefits to giving booster shots to children. Some of the benefits are probably greater for American children, too. They are more likely to be obese or lack health insurance than children elsewhere. “Even though kids are at a lower risk, they are not at zero risk,” Dr. Nirav Shah, the C.D.C.'s principal deputy director, told me when defending the booster recommendation.

But there are also downsides to urging health measures that most people oppose, Galea notes. Only when the benefits of doing so are large (as was the case with perceptions of smoking in the 20th century) should experts try to change people's minds.

The scientific data — and the expert consensus in other countries — make it hard to argue that the benefits of boosting children are large. “I don't think in the U.S.A. they have got the risk-benefit equation correct for children,” Dr. Peter Collignon of the Australian National University told me.

(C.D.C. data shows that the children at highest Covid risk are newborns, who aren't eligible for vaccines even in the U.S. They can instead benefit from a mother's prenatal vaccination.)

The value of candor

Galea believes that the biggest drawback to the U.S. booster policy may be its effect on the C.D.C.'s credibility. When people who are already skeptical of expert advice, as many Americans are, see the C.D.C. insisting on a vaccine with a marginal benefit, they have more reason to question other C.D.C. guidance — such as the urgent importance of childhood vaccines against measles and diphtheria.

“There is a real cost to our not being honest,” Galea said.

When I've asked public health experts off the record what they are doing with their own children, they tend to be honest. Almost all have vaccinated their children, for the sake of both those children and other people. At the same time, some experts told me that they had not boosted their children.

Why? The benefits seem small, for everybody. The costs — like a child's fear of needles or a missed day of school from side effects — also seem small. With such a close call, reasonable parents will make different decisions, and that's OK.

Maybe the C.D.C. would have a bigger impact if it conveyed a similarly candid message.

Lauren Jackson contributed reporting.

THE LATEST NEWS

Trump Trials



The U.S. Supreme Court Kenny Holston/The New York Times

- Donald Trump wants the Supreme Court to weigh in on his claim that he is immune from federal prosecution over Jan. 6. It's an effort to further delay a trial.
- A judge in Georgia this week will hear evidence on the romantic relationship between two prosecutors leading an election interference case against Trump.
- Trump attended a closed-door hearing in the case accusing him of illegally retaining classified documents. Here's a guide to the cases against him.

2024 Election

- Trump suggested that Nikki Haley's husband, who is deployed with the National Guard, left the U.S. to escape her. Haley accused Trump of mocking soldiers.
- For many in South Carolina, Trump's accusations that Haley is opposed to tough immigration policies run counter to her record as governor.
- A Super Bowl commercial for Robert F. Kennedy Jr., which echoed a famous John F. Kennedy campaign ad, upset some members of his family.
- Trump's NATO comments took the focus away from a conversation about Biden's age. Trump's attention-seeking may be the key to Biden's campaign, Peter Baker writes.

- Nancy Pelosi's hometown paper, The San Francisco Chronicle, endorsed her re-election bid but implied that she should make way for younger Democrats.

More on Politics



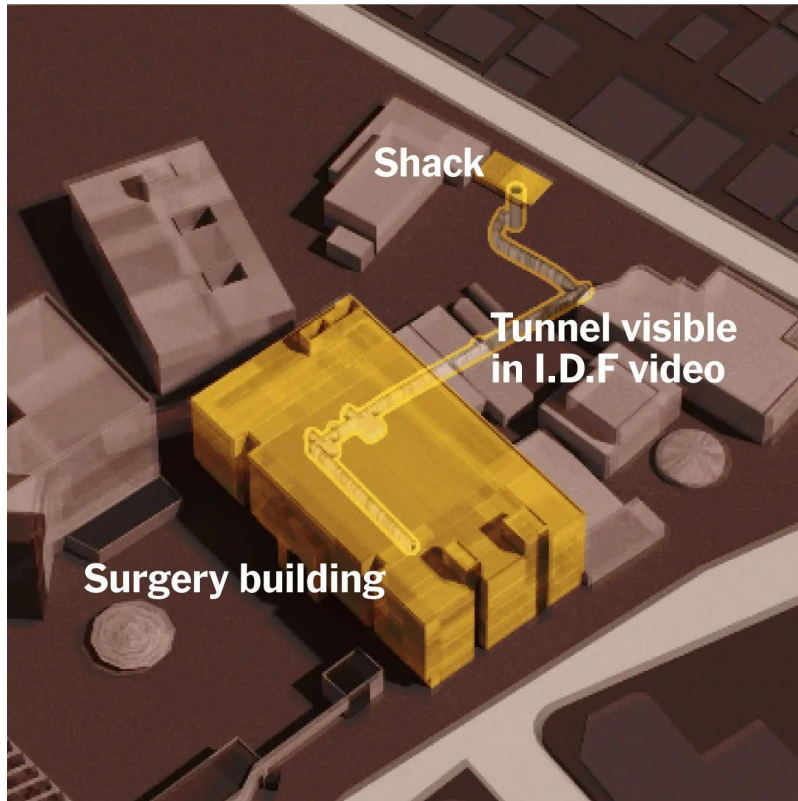
Senate Minority Whip John Thune Kent Nishimura for The New York Times

- The Senate appears on track to pass a bipartisan bill to aid Ukraine and Israel. But Speaker Mike Johnson criticized its lack of border security measures and suggested that he wouldn't bring it up in the House.
- Seventeen Senate Republicans broke with Trump and the majority of their party to back Ukraine aid. Read about who they are, and what's motivating them.

Trump endorsed Michael Whatley, who has supported his false election fraud claims, and Lara Trump, Trump's daughter-in-law, to lead the Republican National Committee.

- A House committee is investigating U.S. spy agencies' work on cases of Havana syndrome, a mysterious illness that affected U.S. officials abroad.

Israel-Hamas War



The New York Times

- A Times investigation found that Hamas maintained tunnels under Gaza's largest medical complex, Al-Shifa, and likely used the hospital grounds as cover. The new evidence falls short of proving Israel's claims that there was a command center there.
- Palestinians sheltering in Rafah, a city in southern Gaza, "need to be protected," Biden said during an appearance with Jordan's king at the White House.
- Biden said the U.S. was helping to negotiate a deal that would free hostages and pause fighting for at least six weeks. The C.I.A. director is expected in Cairo today for talks.
- Israel's military described how special forces conducted an operation to rescue two hostages, which was accompanied by airstrikes in Rafah.
- Palestinians in Rafah described the atmosphere of fear as strikes pummeled the area. "To simply put it, it was a night full of horror, strikes, death and destruction," one said.
- Dareen, an 11-year-old Palestinian girl, lost dozens of family members in a single airstrike. This video tells her story.

International



A campaign rally in Jakarta. Yasuyoshi Chiba/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

- Indonesia, which was under a dictatorship until a few decades ago, calls the election a “Democracy Party.” Read about tomorrow’s vote.
- A deadly cholera outbreak has hit areas of central and southern Africa. Experts blame severe storms, a lack of vaccines and poor sewer systems.
- Finland’s incoming president was elected on a promise to bolster the nation’s new role in NATO, just as Trump’s threats have thrown the future of the alliance into doubt.

Winter Storm

- A winter storm is expected to dump several inches of snow and disrupt daily life in major cities in the Northeast.
- New York City could experience its heaviest snowfall in more than two years. Mayor Eric Adams said that public schools would hold classes remotely today.
- Parts of Connecticut and Massachusetts were forecast to see as much as 12 inches.
- How much snow will fall where you live? Enter your city or town here.

Other Big Stories



At the Super Bowl. Doug Mills/The New York Times

- This year's Super Bowl was watched by 123.4 million people, a record high, according to preliminary data.
- By last month, Denver had received the most migrants per capita of any city in the country.
- Some states are expanding their Medicaid coverage to include help with food, housing and transportation, The Washington Post reports.
- A man was killed and five others were wounded in a shooting at a Bronx subway station during the evening rush hour.

Opinions

Domestic violence shelters should leave behind their tradition of secrecy to allow survivors to connect to their communities, **Rachel Louise Snyder** writes.

It's good to help one another. But when it is for the sick and disabled, help becomes grace, **Valerie Pavidonis** writes.

Here are columns by **Paul Krugman** and **Michelle Goldberg** on Biden's age.

MORNING READS



Here's Johnny.

A 12-foot Travolta: Olinda, Brazil, has become famous for its giant puppets during Carnival, including one made just after “Saturday Night Fever.”

Our first kiss: Meet the married researchers whose investigation pushed back the earliest documentation of kissing by 1,000 years.

The Great Read of the day: What happens when an influencer thrusts your small business into the spotlight? The Pink Stuff found out.

Health: There is growing evidence that exercise is an important part of preventing prostate cancer.

Ask Well: Am I taking too much Advil? Experts explain what’s safe.

Lives Lived: For nearly a quarter-century, Bob Edwards, the host of the NPR news program “Morning Edition,” was “the voice we woke up to,” a colleague said. He died at 76.

SPORTS

College basketball: Arthur Dukes Jr. had set his basketball dreams aside and taken a security job when he was spotted at a pickup game. Now he’s a junior college star.

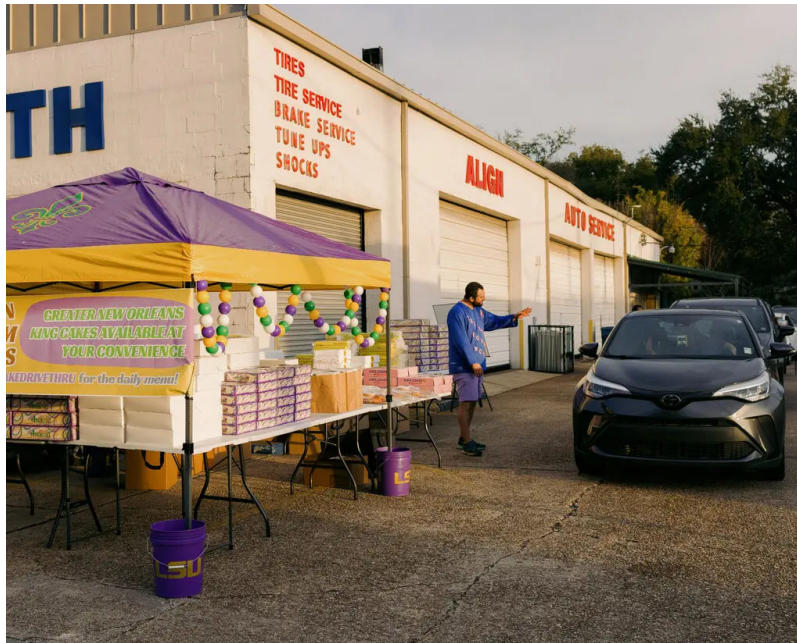
Running: Kelvin Kiptum, who set the world marathon record in Chicago last year, died in a car crash in Kenya. He was 24.

N.F.L.: The Dallas Cowboys have agreed to terms with the former Vikings coach Mike Zimmer to make him their defensive coordinator, according to a league source.

N.B.A.: Victor Wembanyama sealed his second triple-double — the first for a rookie that included blocked shots in 34 years.

Golf: Tiger Woods unveiled his new lifestyle brand Sun Day Red, which will include apparel, one month after ending his 27-year relationship with Nike.

ARTS AND IDEAS



Cake drive-through. Bryan Tarnowski for The New York Times

Fat Tuesday: Just outside New Orleans, a tire shop parking lot has been transformed into a bustling destination for king cakes, the traditional Mardi Gras treat. A drive-through shop there offers cakes from more than a dozen bakeries, ranging from the traditional to the experimental — some filled with strawberries, ice cream, even crawfish. During this year’s king cake season, there was often a line of cars waiting for the shop to open at 7 a.m.

More on culture

- “Now where was I?”: Jon Stewart kicked off his temporary return as host of “The Daily Show” with a mixture of silliness and righteous indignation.
- Beyoncé’s new songs — two country- and Americana-themed tracks — are a salute to the tradition of Black country music, The Washington Post reports.

THE MORNING RECOMMENDS ...

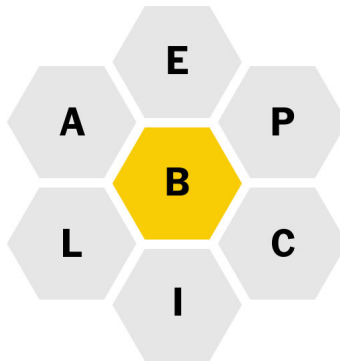
Craig Lee for The New York Times

Use your oven's broiler to make a rich and elegant crème brûlée, with only five ingredients.

Update your millennial style.

Exercise with a doorway pull-up bar.

Vacuum your hardwood floors.

GAMES

Here is today's Spelling Bee. Yesterday's pangrams were *clarify* and *farcically*.

And here are today's Mini Crossword, Wordle, Sudoku and Connections.

Thanks for spending part of your morning with The Times. See you tomorrow. — David

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David Leonhardt runs The Morning, The Times's flagship daily newsletter. Since joining The Times in 1999, he has been an economics columnist, opinion columnist, head of the Washington bureau and founding editor of the Upshot section, among other roles. [More about David Leonhardt](#)

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