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CORONAVIRUS

Norway is going in a completely different direction than Denmark: Would not recommend corona vaccine to the youngest

Norwegian authorities believe that 5-11-year-old children may be better protected against future corona variants if they are infected naturally rather than vaccinated. Vaccine will be an offer aimed at vulnerable people.

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**LARS DAHLAGER**
Journalist**CORONAVIRUS**
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Danish Public Health, will not recommend that children aged 5-11 be vaccinated against coronavirus. They get very little out of it themselves, one can not rule out rare side effects, and then the children can get better protection from having been previously infected with the virus.

It concludes the department in a **sensational academic assessment**. However, the vaccine will be offered to those who may wish to do so, e.g. children with chronic diseases or with vulnerable relatives (children with the most serious, chronic diseases are already offered the vaccine). But most children do not benefit from being vaccinated, says the National Institute of Public Health in an interview with Politiken.

»Should we vaccinate 440,000 Norwegian children for something that causes asymptomatic infections for half and very mild symptoms in almost everyone else? In that age group, we in Norway have had 24 admissions in two years. It is an incredibly large operation to start for a group that has such a small risk, "says chief physician and specialist in pediatric diseases at the National Institute of Public Health Margrethe Greve-Isdahl.

The Norwegian assessment is water on the mill for a growing number of Danish researchers who believe that the Danish authorities must reconsider their recommendation.

»The assumptions have changed, and it makes sense to update the Danish recommendations. In the situation we are in now, you can meaningfully lean more on the Norwegian model, where the vaccine is an offer, "says professor of medicine at SDU Anton Pottegård, who has previously argued for the childhood vaccination. However, the professor does not think it will make the big practical decision - the parents have made their decision.

There is too little benefit for children

The Norwegian rejection of a broad rollout of the vaccine occurs because the benefit to society is limited, after the omicron has become the dominant variant, and because the benefit to the individual child is severely limited. Severe coronary heart disease is rare in the age group and hospitalizations are short-lived. In addition, there is safety: The vaccine has not been approved for the 5-11-year-old group of children for very long, and thus there has been limited time to monitor whether rare side effects may occur.

"We have a lot of data on the use of mRNA vaccines, also for young people, so we do not feel very insecure. But it is clear that if a serious side effect occurs, which was not known from before, in children who have such a low risk, it would be serious for confidence in pandemic vaccinations, "says the chief physician from FHI.

But more startlingly the Norwegian authorities believe that it may be an



vaccinated, an argument that in Denmark has mostly been put forward by vaccine skeptics.

“Children have an immune system that is very easy to shape in terms of what it needs to respond to. And if the immune response starts with an infection that does not cause serious illness in children, they can get a broad immune response, which in the future may more easily adapt to a new variant that we do not know about yet,” says Margrethe Greve-Isdahl.

‘Giving a vaccine can’ steer ‘the immune response in a certain direction, which may make it a little more difficult to convert the immune response to a future variant. But the most important thing here is really that both vaccination and infection can protect against new infections. But when the risk of serious illness in children is so low, there is no great need for a vaccination,’ she says.

Benefits of natural infection

FHI's analysis describes the phenomenon of 'immune imprinting' (also called 'original antigenic sin'), which briefly states that the body's immune system has a tendency to 'remember' its first encounter with a virus - whether it is as an infection or a vaccine. - and program its response on future variants after that.

It can in theory give a poorer immune response if one is vaccinated, as the immune system may react as if it were an old variant. There is no data to show that this is a real problem with sars-cov2 coronavirus, but FHI can not rule it out.

In what way is it a benefit to have a natural infection instead?

“If we are to live with this virus for many seasons to come - and it all suggests - then we need to think about children's immunity not just this season or next season, but think 10, 20 and 30 years ahead. And there, having a good basic immunity will be positive. We do not know if vaccination can make it more difficult, but with children who have such a small risk of becoming seriously ill, a broad immunity from the start can be positive,” says the chief physician.

Is it better for society for the next 2-3 years if the children have been infected rather than vaccinated?

»Yes, if there are more variants in the future, then having undergone the infection may make you better protected to handle the new variants. But the assessment depends on whether you are a child or an adult. For adults - and especially the elderly and the chronically ill - it will be better if they have some immunity from the vaccines before they become ill,” she says.

Norway stands out

Norway is not alone in being cautious: in Sweden, Germany and the United Kingdom, the vaccines are not widely available to the youngest group (though



However, many other European countries have chosen to vaccinate the youngest.

But Norway also stands out in other ways: In Norway, 12-15-year-olds only have to take one vaccine sting because the authorities fear a rare side effect, myocarditis, which mainly affects young boys and men, and especially after the second sting. Also, any 5-11-year-old who needs to be stabbed should be content with a single sting, as it provides the best balance, where the child 'is protected against serious illness and the likelihood of serious side effects is reduced'. According to the authorities, children who have been infected should not be vaccinated. Also for adults, a past infection counts in line with a vaccine sting - if you have been infected, you only need a sting to be 'fully vaccinated'.

In Denmark, we give the vaccine for 5-11 years. Do you think this is the wrong decision?

»It is not so easy for me to comment on the conditions in Denmark. In Norway, it has been natural - we have always tried to convey that this is a disease that is not serious for children, and it has been a basic strategy to keep schools open, even if there has been infection. It is a coherent general assessment we have made all the way around,"she says. But FHI could have ended up making a different assessment if they e.g. should have taken a stand on childhood vaccines during a major wave of delta virus in the fall. At the time, vaccines were thought to prevent the spread of infection.

"But with omikron, we see that being vaccinated does not necessarily contribute so much to preventing the spread of infection, and then we are back to looking at the individual need to be vaccinated. And that need is weaker in children because they have such a small risk of serious illness,"she says.

The National Board of Health itches

In Denmark, the National Board of Health is behind the vaccine recommendations, and here there are no plans to adjust the Danish recommendations.

»It is still our recommendation to vaccinate children aged 5-11, and the reason is that it reduces the risk of infection and that you can pass on the infection, and it helps to increase the overall immunity of the population. How much are we right now counting on,"says unit manager Bolette Søborg. The agency is fully aware that omicron makes the infection-reducing potential of a vaccine more short-lived, "but it fits well with the situation that is right now, with a very high infection pressure that we have to deal with," she says.

Bolette Søborg says that a naturally infected person with omicron is probably better covered against future omicron infection.

but I can not comment on whether one is better covered in the long run. That vaccines should give rise to a poorer immune response to future variants is pure speculation. We know the discussion well, but it is not something we have emphasized,"she says.

Vaccine researcher and professor of global health Christine Stabel Benn, SDU, has long been critical of vaccination of children and welcomes the Norwegian professional assessment.

»I agree with the Norwegian colleagues: There is no scientific basis for recommending vaccination to the youngest. I think one should let the 60 percent. of the Danish parents who have not yet accepted the offer of vaccination of their children, in peace for being branded as someone who does not comply with the authorities' recommendations,"she says.

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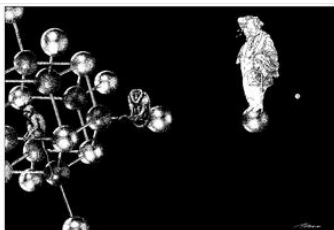
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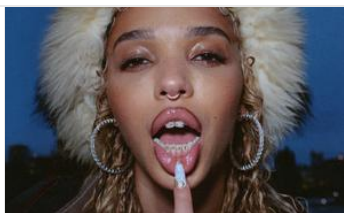
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