



Review

Value of post-licensure data on benefits and risks of vaccination to inform vaccine policy: The example of rotavirus vaccines



Umesh D Parashar*, Margaret M Cortese, Daniel C Payne, Benjamin Lopman, Catherine Yen, Jacqueline E Tate

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Road, MS A34, Atlanta, GA 30333, United States

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ABSTRACT

In 1999, the first rhesus-human reassortant rotavirus vaccine licensed in the United States was withdrawn within a year of its introduction after it was linked with intussusception at a rate of ~1 excess case per 10,000 vaccinated infants. While clinical trials of 60,000–70,000 infants of each of the two current live oral rotavirus vaccines, RotaTeq (RV5) and Rotarix (RV1), did not find an association with intussusception, post-licensure studies have documented a risk in several high and middle income countries, at a rate of ~1–6 excess cases per 100,000 vaccinated infants. However, considering this low risk against the large health benefits of vaccination that have been observed in many countries, including in countries with a documented vaccine-associated intussusception risk, policy makers and health organizations around the world continue to support the routine use of RV1 and RV5 in national infant immunization programs. Because the risk and benefit data from affluent settings may not be directly applicable to developing countries, further characterization of any associated intussusception risk following rotavirus vaccination as well as the health benefits of vaccination is desirable for low income settings.

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1. Introduction

Rotavirus is the leading cause of severe gastroenteritis among young children worldwide, and was estimated to account for approximately one-third of the estimated 578,000 deaths from childhood gastroenteritis and more than 2 million hospitalizations and 25 million outpatient clinic visits among children <5 years of age each year in the pre-vaccine era [1–5]. Because of this tremendous health burden, prevention of rotavirus is a priority for global health agencies. In 1999, a tetravalent rhesus reassortant rotavirus vaccine (RRV-TV, Rotashield, Wyeth) was withdrawn from the United States market within a year of its implementation because it caused intussusception, a form of bowel obstruction [6,7]. Because of this association, clinical trials of >60,000 infants each evaluated a risk of intussusception of the magnitude associated with Rotashield with both the next generation oral rotavirus vaccines—a pentavalent bovine-human reassortant vaccine (RV5, RotaTeq, Merck and Co.) and a monovalent human vaccine (RV1, Rotarix, GSK Biologicals) [8,9]. In 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended global implementation of rotavirus

vaccines, noting the need for further post-licensure evaluation of risks and benefits of rotavirus vaccines [10]. As of May 2015, a total of 77 countries have implemented rotavirus vaccines in their national immunization programs. In this paper, we review the policy implications of data on intussusception risk associated with rotavirus vaccines, particularly in light of the substantial health benefits that have been documented in many countries that have implemented routine rotavirus vaccination.

2. Intussusception with the withdrawn RRV-TV vaccine

The first clear evidence of a link between RRV-TV and intussusception was identified in post-licensure surveillance through the passive US Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System [6]. Subsequently, a national case-control study conducted in 19 US states showed that the risk was greatest (~37-fold increase) during 3 to 7 days after the first RRV-TV dose and overall translated to an excess of ~1 intussusception case in 10,000 RRV-TV recipients [6,7]. These data prompted the withdrawal of RRV-TV from the US market in 1999, less than one year after its introduction [11] and before any evidence of post-licensure benefit of RRV-TV vaccination was available. Later re-analysis of the RRV-TV case-control data prompted debate about whether the relative risk (RR) of intussusception may have been greater for first doses administered after three months

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 404 639 4829.
E-mail address: uap2@cdc.gov (U.D. Parashar).

of age [12–14]. These considerations drove the decision by policy groups to place strict age limits for administration of the first vaccine dose between 6 and 14 weeks of age next generation of rotavirus vaccines, RV5 and RV1.

3. Intussusception and current rotavirus vaccines, RV5 and RV1

3.1. Pre-licensure trials

RV5 and RV1 both underwent large clinical trials of 60,000–70,000 infants each, designed specifically to evaluate safety with respect to intussusception [8,9]. For RV5, six vaccine recipients and five placebo recipients developed confirmed intussusception within 42 days after any of the three vaccine doses (RR = 1.6 [95% CI: 0.4–6.4]). For RV1, six vaccine recipients and seven placebo recipients had intussusception within 31 days of either of the two doses (RR = 0.85 [95% CI: 0.30 to 2.42]). The encouraging safety and efficacy data led to licensure and use of both RV5 and RV1 in many countries beginning in 2006; however, post-marketing surveillance for intussusception was recommended to further evaluate this potential adverse event.

3.2. Post-licensure data

Post-marketing surveillance conducted in several countries has shown a low intussusception risk with both RV5 and RV1. An increased intussusception risk has been documented among infants within 1–7 days after receiving the first RV1 dose in Mexico and after the second RV1 dose in Brazil, translating to approximately 1 excess case per 51,000 vaccinated infants in Mexico and 1 per 68,000 vaccinated infants in Brazil [15]. Similar results for Mexico were found in a separate post-marketing study conducted by the vaccine manufacturer [16]. In Australia, an increased intussusception risk has been documented with both RV5 and RV1, estimated at about 5.6 excess cases of intussusception per 100,000 vaccinated infants [17,18]. Finally, US post-marketing studies have also identified a small increased risk of intussusception associated with both RV5 and RV1, with an estimated risk of about 1–5 excess intussusception cases per 100,000 vaccinated infants [19–23].

4. Rotavirus vaccine impact and effectiveness

4.1. Pre-licensure trials

RV5 and RV1 showed 85–98% efficacy against severe rotavirus gastroenteritis in these trials conducted in the Americas and Europe, with good protection against disease caused by rotavirus strains not included in the vaccines [8,9]. However, because the performance of vaccines in the ideal conditions of a clinical trial can differ from those in routine programmatic use, post-licensure monitoring has been ongoing in many countries that have implemented rotavirus vaccination programs.

4.2. Post-licensure data

Implementation of RV5 and RV1 has had a rapid and remarkable impact on reducing all-cause diarrhea and rotavirus diarrhea hospitalizations in many early vaccine introducing countries. In the United States, following vaccine implementation in 2006, rotavirus hospitalizations have declined 60–83% in children <5 years of age and all-cause diarrhea hospitalizations decreased by 29–50% compared with pre-vaccine years [24–29]. In addition to providing direct protection to vaccinated infants, indirect protection, likely from reduced rotavirus transmission in the community, has also

Table 1

Risk of intussusception and benefits of rotavirus vaccination in Mexico, Brazil, Australia, and the United States.

Country	Diarrhea hospitalizations (deaths) prevented by vaccination	Intussusception cases (deaths) potentially caused by vaccination
Mexico	11,600 (663)	41 (2)
Brazil	69,600 (640)	55 (3)
Australia	7000 (0)	6 (0)
United States	53,444 (14)	35–166(0.1–0.5)

been observed among children too old to have received the vaccine, as well as among adults in the United States [30–32]. One study estimated that over two seasons from 2008–2009, an estimated total of 60,000–80,000 diarrheal hospitalizations were prevented in young children resulting in a medical cost savings of \$240–\$280 million, and these savings have continued through subsequent rotavirus seasons [26,33]. Similar declines in rotavirus and all-cause diarrhea hospitalizations have been noted in other early vaccine introducing countries including some European countries, Australia, and Latin America [34–49].

Importantly, in addition to decreases in diarrhea hospitalizations, declines in childhood diarrhea mortality have been observed following the introduction of rotavirus vaccines in Mexico, Brazil, and Panama [45,50–54]. In Mexico, these reductions in diarrhea mortality have been sustained over 4 post-vaccine introduction years and have been observed and sustained in different geographic regions of the country [50,51].

5. Policy considerations based on risk and benefit data

The decision to continue a vaccination program in the face of a documented, modest risk of an adverse event should take into consideration the public health benefits of vaccination. As post-licensure data on the risk of intussusception associated with rotavirus vaccination has emerged, several countries have conducted analyses comparing the risks of vaccination against the observed health benefits of vaccination in their own countries. It is worth noting that data on real world benefits of RRV-TV vaccination were unavailable at the time it was withdrawn from the US market, and the availability of such data for newer vaccines has provided key information for decision making as data on intussusception risk has emerged. Based on consideration of the substantial benefits of vaccination in the face of low intussusception risk (Table 1), policy makers in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, and Australia, as well as global health authorities such as the World Health Organization (WHO), continue to strongly support routine rotavirus vaccination of infants [55].

Furthermore, it is not clear whether the short-term increased risk of intussusception in the first few weeks after vaccination translates into an overall population-level increase in intussusception incidence in the first year of life. In the United States, ecologic analyses of trends in intussusception hospitalization among infants before and after the implementation of rotavirus vaccines have not consistently demonstrated an overall increase in rates post-vaccination [56,57]. This has led some to speculate that rotavirus vaccination might “trigger” intussusception earlier among some infants among whom intussusception would have occurred anyway later in infancy. In addition, intussusception has been associated with three different attenuated live oral rotavirus vaccines, including RV1 that consists of an attenuated single human rotavirus strain of a genotype that is most prevalent globally. Thus, one might hypothesize that wild-type rotavirus infection could be a cause of intussusception. If this is the case, rotavirus vaccination may prevent cases of intussusception caused by wild-type rotavirus infection later in infancy, as was suggested by preliminary data

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