

Dear 12-year-old me,

almost every good story begins with a *Once upon a time*, and so does yours. Once upon a time, you were the tiniest little human tucked away in your mum's belly. You had been moulded out of love and nature's pure instinct for the continuation of life. Your mum and dad were exhilarated but also fearful after having felt powerless in protecting a child once before. You see, you would have had another older sister had things gone the way they should—had she not stayed in the womb for too long. There are no words to describe the pain of a parent having to bear and give birth to a stillborn. (As a cruel irony, she would have been named Živa, the one who is alive.) Utter helplessness and despair in grief for things that could have been yet would never be. But also fierce determination later on when a new life sprung out of your mother—a vow to protect her future child. Yet again, there were things beyond her control. There wasn't much she could do against radiation from Chernobyl penetrating through her skin but hope it would not harm you. Whatever she could do to protect you, however, she most certainly did. Even before you were born, she let the doctors inject her with a substance called immunoglobulin, as your blood and hers did not match in what's called the rhesus factor, meaning antibodies could have developed in her blood and start attacking yours. And from the minute you were born, she did the best she could to protect you against the many diseases lurking around in the world outside the safe haven of her womb.

As you well know by now, you've had a fair share of body aches and pains, from a fractured jaw to headaches and unrelenting series of scarlet fever episodes, not to mention countless colds and bumps. Not even your mum could wrap you up in a bubble and prevent these from happening to you. All she could do was console and nurse you back to health. Or so it may seem. What you may not realise yet but would contemplate later on in life, is what she also did and what YOU can do to prevent yourself, your future child or anyone else you might be around from falling ill. It's a decision your mum made for you, and you'll be glad she did. Any discomfort or pain you went through was not as life threatening as the list of diseases you could have been exposed to had you not been vaccinated against them. Owing to this decision, you received injections that prompted your body's immune system to develop defences in the form of the so-called antibodies. This way, your parents made sure you were protected against very serious illnesses including diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, polio, measles, mumps, rubella etc. What is more, it was not only you who got protected by your parents in this way. It was also your little friend who was allergic to all sorts of things, including eggs, and couldn't get vaccinated against all those diseases, as well as others like her. Your future niece and nephew had they fallen seriously ill. Your beloved grandma who could have been put into serious danger by a simple flu virus, even if you could recover without much risk to yourself. It's not what would end her life but it could have been just as easily.

From what you may hear, vaccines also do not come completely and 100% devoid of risks. There is a tiny chance that side effects may harm you, as people who oppose vaccinations—also known as anti-vaxers—warn. Although there is no firm proof that they actually do on their own, without any other underlying medical conditions. What is more, some 'proofs'

have already been proven wrong. The most notorious is the make-belief claim that vaccines cause autism, which is a hypothesis that has been solidly disproven and rejected due to major mistakes made during research. However, even on an off chance that vaccines may cause serious side effects (other than some fever and swelling as a normal, harmless temporary reaction)—looking at the numbers, it is much more likely you would fall ill due to not receiving vaccination than it is to experience major side effects. And like I said—it's not just about you but also the people around you whose immune system may not be as strong as (hopefully) yours. Don't you think it would be a selfish decision? To gamble not only with your own health but also the health of others? Can you imagine being in their shoes? For example being that sweet cousin of your best friend who was diagnosed with leukaemia when she was just a year and a half old.... Who is now a happy first grader doing ballet and German, beyond wise and hyperactive for her age, simply being larger than life itself but who had had to go through hell to get where she is now? What if she had not been surrounded by her peers who were able to get protected, and whose parents protected her in this way as well?

It is not possible to fully wrap the people we love into bubbles. But the least we can do is try to do what is most likely to get as close as possible to a bubble that could protect us all.

You'll learn it is not possible to control everything in life, including what can still go wrong in the body despite all our efforts. The best we can do is try to minimise the risk. Even though your mum could not ultimately protect herself, she did her absolute best to protect yours. Never forget this.

All Best,

Your Future Self