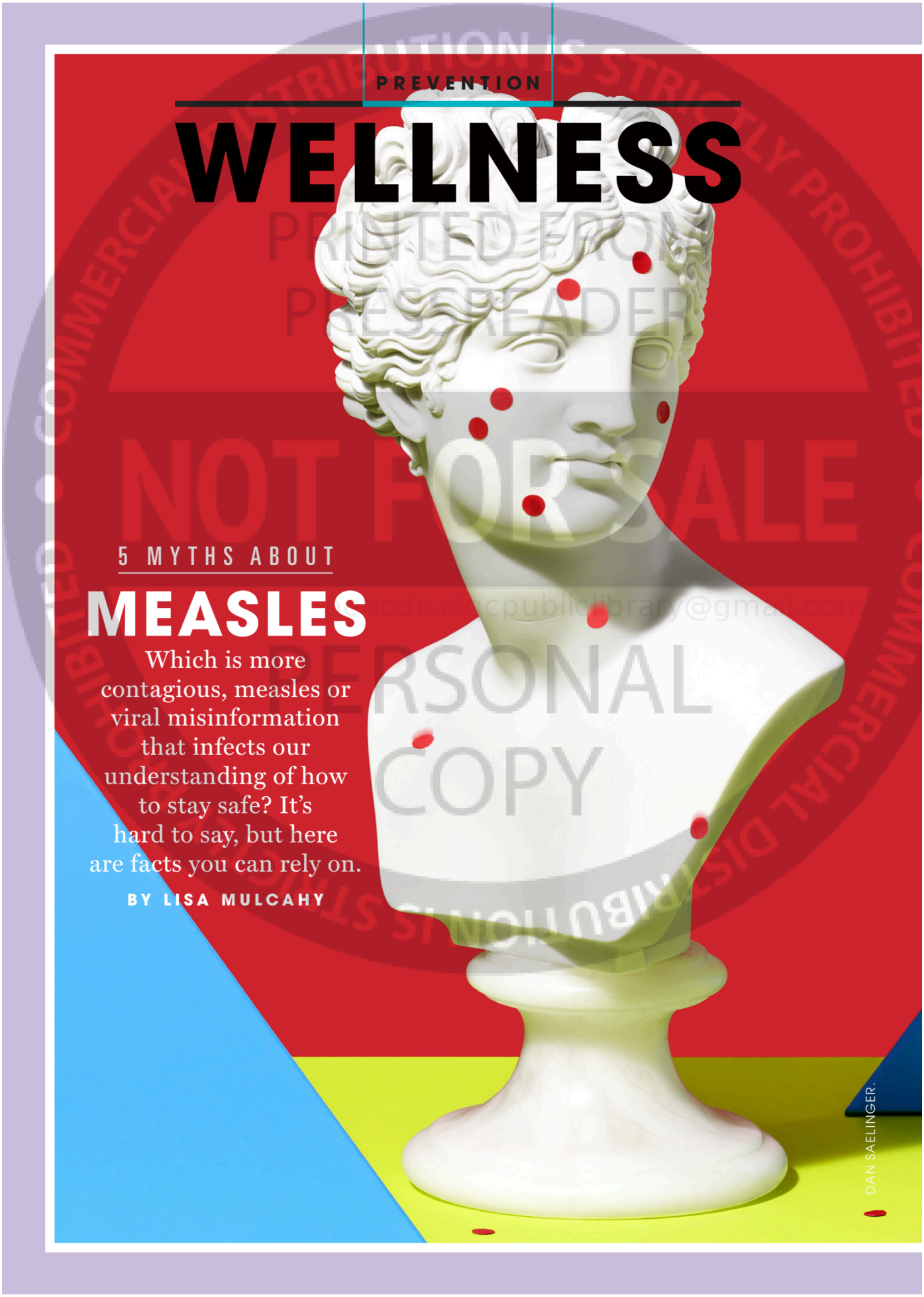
- Viruses / Communicable diseases



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1

MYTH:

Measles isn't that serious.

MYTHBUSTER

Not true. "Measles can be very dangerous, even deadly, in healthy individuals," says Patricia A. Stinchfield, N.P., immediate past president of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases in Bethesda, MD. About one in five unvaccinated people in the U.S. who gets measles is hospitalized, she adds, and one to three in 1,000 people with measles will die even with the best care. Unvaccinated kids, pregnant women, and people with compromised immune systems can develop serious complications. "One out of every 1,000 people with measles will develop brain swelling, which could lead to brain damage or other neurological problems like seizures, blindness, and deafness," Stinchfield says, "and as many as one in 20 children with measles will get pneumonia." This is why the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine is crucial for kids. Talk to your health care provider if you don't know your vaccination status or if you were immunized between 1963 and 1967, when some measles vaccines were less effective.

2

MYTH:

Antibiotics can treat measles.

MYTHBUSTER

This is not possible. "Measles is a virus, and antibiotics do not work against viral infections," only bacterial infections, Stinchfield notes. There may be complications from measles that are bacterial in origin, and antibiotics might treat those, she adds, "but no specific antiviral drugs are approved to treat measles. The goal of medical care is to relieve symptoms."

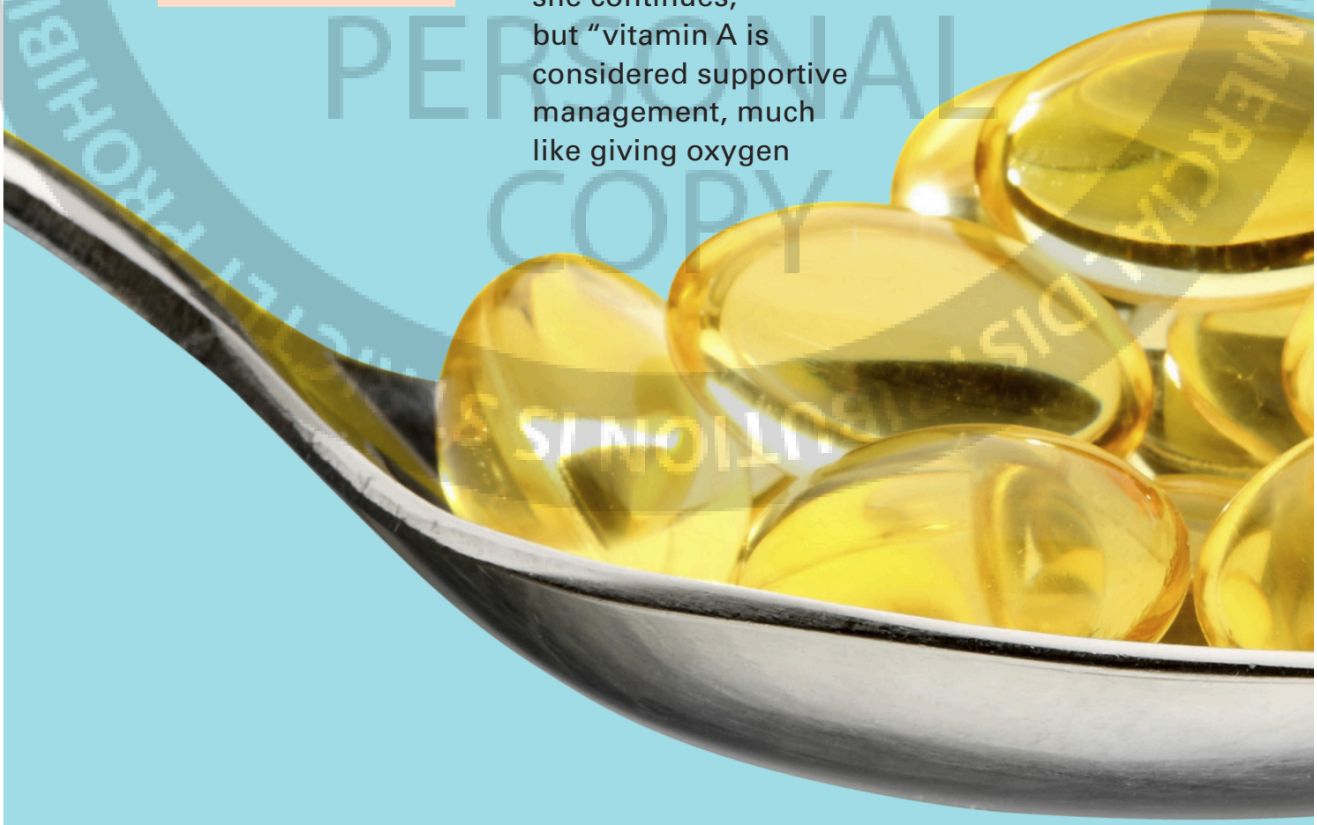
3

MYTH:

Vitamin A and cod liver oil prevent and treat measles.

MYTHBUSTER

These claims—rampant on social media—are inaccurate. "Taking cod liver oil does not prevent measles," says Stinchfield. As for vitamin A, "It may be prescribed by a knowledgeable health care professional for use in children who are hospitalized with measles," she continues, but "vitamin A is considered supportive management, much like giving oxygen to someone with pneumonia. It doesn't cure or treat measles but supports immune function while the patient is in the acute stage of the illness." Because there are health risks associated with high doses of vitamin A, don't try this at home—see a doctor.



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4

MYTH:

A good diet and exercise routine will protect you against measles complications.

MYTHBUSTER

Nope. "A balanced diet and exercise are important for all aspects of health," says Tuhina Joseph, D.O., a pediatric infectious disease physician and an assistant professor of pediatrics at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston. But if they're exposed, "anyone who is not immune to measles will likely contract the infection no matter how healthy they are." (There is evidence that kids in low- and middle-income countries with malnutrition do worse if they get measles, but those countries also have a lack of access to food and medical resources that affects outcomes.) The solution: vaccination. "The MMR vaccine teaches the immune system to specifically recognize the measles virus *before* someone is exposed to it in order to prevent infection," says Dr. Joseph.



GETTY IMAGES.

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5

MYTH:

"Natural immunity" offers better lasting protection than vaccines.

MYTHBUSTER

"Natural immunity" means you must endure measles for your immune system to learn to fight it next time you're exposed, and this is dangerous. "Infection does provide immunity afterward, but there are significant risks with measles, including severe complications," says Dr. Joseph. Don't intentionally hang out with anyone who has been exposed or has a confirmed case to "get it over with." Know the symptoms to watch out for in others (or yourself): Measles can present with a fever, a dry cough, a runny nose, a sore throat, pink eye, little white spots with bluish-white middles on a red background inside the inner cheek, and a red, flat, blotchy skin rash. Choose vaccination instead. "The MMR vaccine has safely been given to millions of people for well over 50 years," Dr. Joseph points out.

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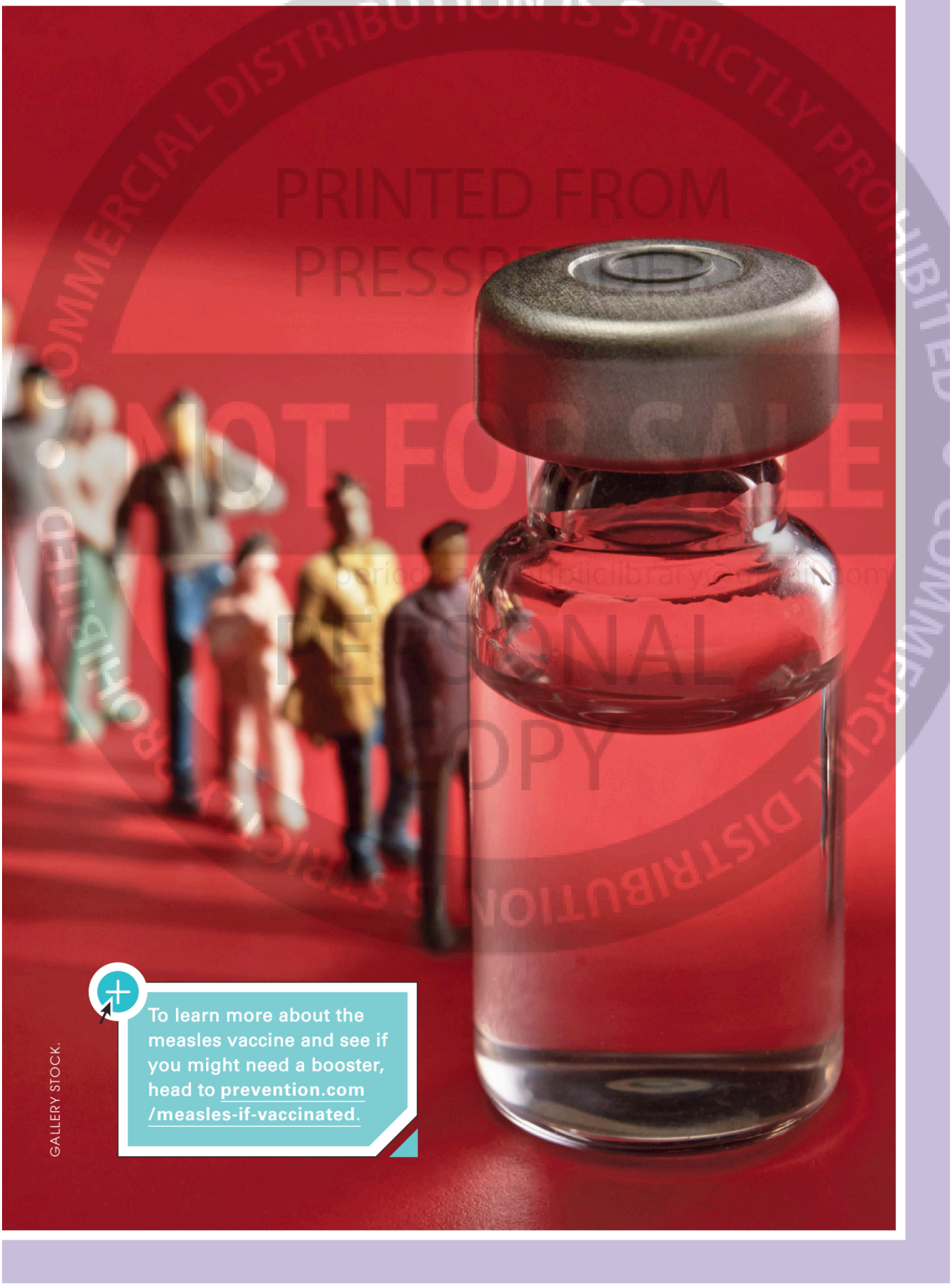

To learn more about the measles vaccine and see if you might need a booster, head to prevention.com/measles-if-vaccinated.

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