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Adults Need Their Shots Too

Most people agree that it is important for children to be vaccinated against a number of diseases—in fact, the law mandates that all children will receive the required vaccinations before they can attend school. Unfortunately, the same emphasis is not placed on adult vaccination.

Just like children, adults need to be vaccinated according to a vaccination schedule in order to be protected from many diseases. Yet, according to the National Vaccine Advisory Committee, adults underutilize available vaccines. Among the suggested reasons for this underutilization are “under appreciation of the importance of adult vaccine-preventable diseases, uncertainty or lack of knowledge about the safety and efficacy of adult vaccines,” and “confusion related to differing vaccination schedules.” But “appropriately timed” adult vaccination can reduce and prevent illness and death from many diseases, including influenza, pneumonia, hepatitis, diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella, and pertussis.

The National Coalition for Adult Immunization estimates that as many as 70,000 adults die each year in this country from a vaccine-preventable disease. According to the Centers for Disease Control, there are 36,000 deaths from influenza, 6,600 deaths from pneumonia, 5,000 deaths from hepatitis B, and 5 deaths from tetanus. Further, thousands more people become unnecessarily ill and develop serious complications from vaccine-preventable diseases. For instance, complications from mumps include encephalitis, meningitis, arthritis, deafness, and kidney damage; measles can lead to pneumonia and encephalitis; diphtheria can progress to fatal lung disease; and chickenpox can set the stage for pneumonia, encephalitis, and bacterial infection.

Within the past year, a new vaccine has been licensed for adults, adding protection from pertussis (whooping cough) to the vaccine for tetanus and diphtheria. The new vaccine, Tdap, should be administered to adults who have not received a booster shot for tetanus and diphtheria in the past 10 years. The vaccine has the ability to reduce or eliminate the 600,000 cases of pertussis reported each year. Further, since pertussis is especially serious for infants, immunizing adults should result in a reduction of pertussis in the infants with whom they come into contact. The CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) has issued the recommendation to vaccinate adults from 19-64 years with this new vaccine.

The CDC National Immunization Program advises adults to be immunized for certain diseases according to the following schedule:

- Tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap)** – all adults, every 10 years;
- Influenza (flu)** –all adults, especially those 50 years of age and older, every year;
- Pneumococcal (pneumonia)** – adults 65 and older, and those with conditions that place them at high risk from pneumonia and its complications, one time after age 65;
- Hepatitis B** (adults at risk), 3 doses at timed intervals;

- Measles/Mumps/Rubella** (MMR) – susceptible adults, one or two times
- Varicella** (Chickenpox) – susceptible adults, 2 doses
- Other: **Meningitis** (travelers, college students living in dormitories) 1 dose,
Hepatitis A (travelers, persons with chronic liver disease) 2 doses.

Adults who travel may need additional vaccinations depending upon their destination. Also, two new vaccines have been developed. **Zoster** provides protection from shingles and has been licensed for people 60 years of age and older, and **Human-papillomavirus** (HPV) is recommended for women from adolescence through age 26; 3 doses are needed.

All too often, adults neglect their own health by failing to schedule regular physical examinations with their doctors. But every visit to the doctor provides an opportunity for vaccination; it would be wise to make and keep routine doctor's appointments, and to discuss which immunizations should be given at that time with the physician.

For further information about adult immunizations or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org). The Centers for Disease Control provides useful information about vaccination schedules and recommendations on its web site at www.cdc.gov/nip. Specific ACIP recommendations can be obtained by calling the CDC INFO Contact at 1-800-232-4636 or by visiting the Immunization Action Coalition's (AIC) web site at www.immunize.org.acip.