
Poki Stewart Namkung: Kids -- and adults -- need to keep up on immunizations

For younger children, well-child visits to pediatricians and starting kindergarten are built-in reminders of the importance of childhood vaccinations. Keeping up with these vaccinations protects children themselves, as well as others -- pregnant women carrying babies that have no immunity yet, infants not old enough for the vaccine and people who may not be protected for other reasons e.g., if they have a disease like leukemia that prevents them from being vaccinated.

Adolescents and adults are exposed to many vaccine-preventable diseases, which can affect their own health or threaten the health of others with whom they come into contact. For example, California has an epidemic of whooping cough pertussis now with the most cases reported in 55 years. Nine infants under the age of 3 months have died. These babies are too young to be vaccinated and have little protection and stamina to fight this infection.

In Santa Cruz County, we have seen an increase in pertussis cases this year 12th highest case rate in the state, especially among 8- to 13-year-olds but thankfully, no deaths so far. Unfortunately, immunity to pertussis whether from having had the disease before or from a childhood immunization wears off over time, which explains why this older age group might be particularly vulnerable.

A new combination vaccine called the "Tdap" vaccine that protects against diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus has been available since 2005, but as of 2008, only 44 percent of California teens and 6 percent of adults nationwide had received it. The California Department of Health recommends that anyone over the age of 7 who has not received the Tdap vaccine should do so -- especially anyone who is in close contact with infants. There is no upper age limit to being vaccinated. Even among older children and adults, in whom the disease is not typically lethal, it does take a toll -- so much so that it is sometimes called "the 100-day cough". If severe, ongoing discomfort for several months isn't enough motivation to ask your doctor about the vaccine, imagine if you were to inadvertently pass the disease on to a young child, in whom it could become very serious.

Another vaccine that is particularly important for an older back-to-school crowd -- college freshmen -- is the meningococcal series that prevents many types of meningitis an inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. You don't have to wait for college to get this vaccine; the routine recommended age is 11 or 12 just when young pre-teens should be getting a Tdap booster, too. When it's time for college, a booster dose of meningococcal vaccine is recommended.

The members of the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County -- a local countywide collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders -- strongly recommend appropriate immunizations for people of all ages in our county. In many ways, vaccines have become victims of their own success, because they have removed the day-to-day reminders of how serious -- and, too often, lethal -- these diseases of the past once were, and could be again if enough people lack immunity to them.

Please do your part to protect yourself, your family, and your entire community by asking your doctor about current vaccinations and boosters for everyone in your family, not just young children. For more information on vaccines and where to get them, please visit the Health Services Agency website: www.santacruzhealth.org/phealth/cd/3immunize.htm.

Poki Namkung is Santa Cruz County's health officer and a member of the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County.