

Vaccines for Adults

by Myra Lavenue, Contributor

We hear so much about children and immunizations, but what do adults need to know to keep themselves safe from disease?



Many adults think about getting vaccines only if they are about to travel abroad, but the risks of contracting diseases are high at home, too. We think that because we got vaccinated as children, we are therefore covered for life. Not true. But your level of risk depends on who you are, how old you are and the company you keep.

"I think everybody should get just about every vaccine that is recommended," says Dr. Megan Whitman of the Legacy Internal Medicine Program in Portland, Ore. "For people who have had an illness or a complication from an illness, their health is more at risk, so they need to protect themselves a little bit more."

In December of 2009, a report from the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that adults by and large do not get vaccinated. In fact, inoculation rates range from 6 to 57 percent, depending on the vaccine.

This low inoculation trend can be attributed to two factors, according to Dr. Paul R. Cieslak, Medical Director, Immunization Program, Oregon Public Health Division: "It comes down to a lack of awareness combined with the infrequency of visits to the doctor. There is no well-baby series for adults."

Why bother with any of the other shots if you're healthy? Dr. Heather Zwickey, Dean of Research at the National College of Natural Medicine in Portland, Ore., says, "The more you age, the less of an immune response [you have] to a vaccine. The body starts giving up, so it's going to start keeping track of the things we are exposed to the most."

But when you visit the CDC's website to check for what's recommended, the various vaccines can get a little overwhelming to track. So let's break down the recommendations and get a clearer picture of what you need, when you need it and why.

Yearly Adult Vaccines

One vaccine that has seen rising inoculation rates is the annual influenza shot, primarily because of the recent scare over H1N1, or swine flu. The CDC estimates that the flu kills 23,000 people every year, even though only 10 to 20 percent of the population comes down with it each year. With an 80 percent accuracy rate, the annual flu shot is first on the list of vaccines the CDC recommends you receive.

Dr. Whitman's patients tell her, "Every time I get the flu shot, I get the flu." She says this is just not possible with a killed virus. "On a population level," says Whitman, "the more people vaccinated, the higher the immunity in that area. And this protects a lot of people."

As the manager of Oregon's Acute and Communicable Diseases Prevention program, Dr. Cieslak is a firm believer in the vaccine, and feels that everyone over age six months should receive it. "It's very favorable for working adults because it saves you from losing up to a week of work," he says.

What Is the Flu Shot?

The flu shot is an antiviral cocktail, created fresh yearly from recommendations by the World Health Organization, and based on its research around what strands may possibly hit the following year.

Must-Haves for Coeds

We normally think of the health risks of young adults living in college dormitories to be related to binge drinking and poor diets. However, the spread of disease is much more real and prevalent. The immunization must-haves for this age group are:

- Human Papillomavirus (HPV): To prevent cervical cancer in women, females age 13 to 26 are strongly recommended to get this set of vaccines before they become sexually active.
- Measles, Mumps and Rubella: If a young adult did not receive this series as a child, they need to before going to college.
- Meningitis: One shot helps prevent bacterial meningitis, a debilitating illness causing inflammation in the spinal cord.

Booster Shots Every 10 Years

All adults need to keep up to date on their tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis (whooping cough) shots. These immunizations can be taken together, in a vaccine known as Tdap. Pertussis is especially important for those with small children, because whooping cough can be deadly for babies and toddlers.

Vaccines for the Over-60 Set

For anyone 60 or over, the recommendations include pertussis, for those who have grandchildren. Children often pass it to their grandparents, just as other adults often pass it to children. Immunizing against pneumonia helps prevent it from attacking this more vulnerable population. With the decrease of herpes zoster, or shingles, in our environment, our exposure to that virus also decreases. Exposure is what keeps our immunization strong. Even if you had chickenpox as a child, you should get this vaccine when you reach 60 to help re-stimulate your immune system to fight off herpes zoster.

While it's a smart idea to keep current on your shots, the choice is in your hands. "Ultimately, it's up to each individual to determine what vaccines they choose to get," says Whitman.

This is not a comprehensive list of available immunizations. To see all the vaccines recommended by the CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/adult-vpd.htm>), covering many types of health conditions and exceptions, please visit their guide to adult vaccines.

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