



National Adult Immunization Awareness Week September 21 – September 27, 2008

Vaccines save lives. That is just as true for adults as it is for children. In the early 20th century, the average life expectancy was below 50. There were no antibiotics to treat infections. There were no immunizations to prevent them. Communicable diseases like the flu and pneumonia were leading causes of death. A lot has changed since then, and immunizations have contributed to that change. But they work only if we get them. Each year, almost 50,000 adults die from vaccine-preventable diseases and their complications.

There are a number of immunizations that specifically target adults. A bacteria called pneumococcus is a common cause of pneumonia and infections in other parts of the body in older adults. There is an immunization that can prevent pneumococcal disease. Yet there are over 40,000 cases of pneumococcal pneumonia each year, and 5,000 deaths in the U.S. Being immunized could prevent most of them.

Influenza, or “flu”, usually infects at least 10% of the U.S. population every year. It kills an average of 36,000 people each year, most of them adults. Some strains of flu can kill hundreds of thousands more. Immunization against flu can drastically cut that number, and reduce the number of people needing to be hospitalized, as well. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all individuals over the age of 6 months get immunized against flu yearly.



Both flu and pneumococcal pneumonia cases peak between October and March each year. National Adult Immunization Awareness Week reminds us to take advantage of these medical advances. It will reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from these vaccine-preventable diseases.

Adults also benefit from other immunizations. Any one who had chicken pox as a child has some risk of developing shingles as an adult. Shingles is most common in people over 55, because as we age our immune systems weaken. The virus that causes both chicken pox and shingles lingers in our bodies from the time we are first infected until we die. When the immune system is weakened by the aging process or other infections, the virus can reactivate to cause shingles, which is a very painful condition. There is now a vaccine to prevent that from happening.



Tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis can affect adults as well as children. These vaccines need to be repeated periodically throughout your life. Ask your doctor if you are due to receive them. Although pertussis (whooping cough) is not usually serious in adults, your being vaccinated can protect your children and grandchildren!

Finally, there are some vaccines that specifically target younger adults. The HPV vaccine protects women against some strains of the human papilloma virus (HPV). Some strains of this virus cause cervical cancer. Others cause genital warts. There is also a vaccine against something called meningococcal disease. This infection targets young adults and can kill them quickly or leave them seriously impaired.

There are vaccines that protect against serious liver infections called hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Hepatitis B, in particular, can become a chronic, lifelong infection that may result in serious liver damage. Infected people can transmit their hepatitis to family members and sexual partners. They may actually develop liver cancer as a result of this infection.

Hepatitis A is much less likely to cause death or long term illness. Only about 100 people die of hepatitis A each year. But it makes those who have it feel really miserable, and it can take months to recover from it. Because food handlers with hepatitis A can contaminate the food they prepare, over a quarter of a million cases of hepatitis A infections occurred each year until the vaccine became available.

All of these vaccines save lives. Maybe one of them could be yours. Take the time to “take the shots” that can prevent a host of diseases! For more information, contact your family physician or the Ontario County Public Health Department.