

Adults and shots: They're not just for tots

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Adults, listen up: Vaccines aren't just for kids. The shots you received as a child won't protect you forever.

Whether you reached adulthood this year or decades ago, your need for vaccines never ends. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are vaccines available to protect adults against 14 preventable conditions. While the vaccines are safe and effective, the diseases they help prevent are serious: diphtheria, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, herpes zoster, human papillomavirus, influenza, measles, meningococcal disease, mumps, pertussis, pneumococcal disease, rubella, tetanus and varicella, also known as chickenpox.

Some of the 14 vaccines are recommended for everyone. Others target specific groups of people, those with certain medical conditions or workers whose jobs put them at risk.

Sadly, about 50,000 adults in the United States die each year from vaccine-preventable diseases and their complications.

If you think your immune system is bullet-proof just because you eat right, watch your weight and exercise regularly, think again.

"Lots of times, people don't know they are in a risk category for a vaccine," says Gina Mootrey, DO, MPH, CDC's associate director for adult immunizations. "They think they are leading a healthy lifestyle and believe their immune system is strong enough to fight off any infection. But leading a healthy lifestyle is not sufficient by itself. It should include prevention measures, including vaccination."

You wouldn't dare fall behind on your kids' vaccines, or let Fluffy's rabies shot lapse, so why would you want to miss out on important vaccinations that could save your life?

The next time you visit your health care provider, take advantage of the time with her or him to



ask if you're due for any vaccinations.

"It is much better to prevent a disease than to treat a disease," Mootrey says. "We have now quite an array of vaccines for adults, and it is to everyone's benefit that they take advantage of the protection provided by vaccines."

Vaccines are among the safest medical products available. But before you roll up your sleeve, your health care provider should screen you for special risk factors associated with the particular vaccines you're getting. For example, flu vaccine is grown in eggs, so if you're allergic to eggs you could have a reaction.

The following are a few of the vaccinations that are of importance for adults.

Influenza vaccine

Would you let income tax season sneak up on you unprepared? Of course not. So why would you let flu season catch you off guard? Flu comes around every year, usually from about October to May. Influenza vaccination is recommended for all adults ages 50 and older, adults who have certain chronic medical conditions, such as heart disease and asthma, and women who will be pregnant during flu season, among other adult groups. But any adult who wants to avoid the flu can get the shot. If you get the vaccine but still get sick, the good news is that the vaccine can make it milder.

Pneumococcal vaccine

Many adults aren't aware that there's a vaccine that can protect them against bacterial pneumonia, which can attack different parts of the body. The best way to protect against pneumococcal disease is to get your vaccination, especially if you're 65 or older, live in a nursing home or long-term care facility or have diabetes or chronic heart, lung, liver or kidney disorders.

For those at risk, the pneumococcal vaccine is just as critical as the influenza vaccine, and for most people, a single dose of vaccine is recommended. Better to be safe than sorry on this key vaccination.

Shingles vaccine

If you're 60 or older, definitely ask your doctor about the shingles, or herpes zoster, vaccine. Of the approximately 1 million Americans

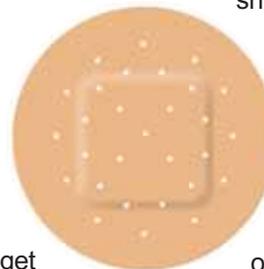


Keep a copy of your records

Searching for old immunization records? Good luck. Such records can be hard to track down. Over the years, doctors retire and medical practices change hands. To avoid having to repeat vaccinations during a health emergency or when you switch doctors, ask your health care provider for an immunization record and take it with you to every appointment. Download a free handy adult immunization record card at www.immunize.org/adultizcards/adultizcard.pdf.

Photos and art courtesy iStockphoto and Getty Images

who develop shingles each year, more than half are ages 60 and older. Shingles — a painful, blistering rash that tends to occur on one side of the body — is a common illness that's caused by the varicella zoster virus. In case you haven't heard, that's the same virus that causes chickenpox. Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk for shingles, but the shingles vaccine can help prevent it.



Tetanus

Can you remember the last time you had a tetanus shot? Lots of folks don't think about it until they end up in the emergency room with a deep cut or burn, but you should keep up on it, especially if you're a gardener. Tetanus, which is caused by tetanus bacteria, is a serious illness that can cause painful tightening of the muscles and "locking" of the jaw. According to the National Institutes of Health, the bacteria naturally find a home in saliva, soil, dust and manure and usually enter the body through a deep cut, like the ones you might get when you cut yourself with a knife or step on a nail. Gardeners are at special risk because they spend so much time with their hands in the dirt. The tetanus vaccine can prevent tetanus, but its protection wanes over time. Adults should get a tetanus shot, or booster, every 10 years.

 American Public Health Association

>> For more immunization information, visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines.

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