Helping Teens Make Smart Decisions About Vaccination

Adolescent Health & Well-Being

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If clinicians and public health advocates had our way, teen health in the United States would look very different. More teens would use contraception and sleep for a full 8-9 hours each night. Fewer teens would use e-cigarettes or text while driving.

We can make strong recommendations and keep repeating advice about the importance of these issues to parents, however at the end of the day teens are starting to establish independence and may be the ones who are making these decisions about their health. Therefore, it is imperative to gauge their feelings about sleep, diet, sexual health, technology, and substance use to aid them in choosing the safest, healthiest options that will help them transition into healthy, productive adults. One of my priorities is to add vaccines to the list of healthy behavior for teens.

Which Vaccines Do Teens Need?

Teens need a number of vaccines to protect them from preventable health conditions both during adolescence and later in life.

HPV

One of the most common vaccines we hear about is the Human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which can prevent HPV and HPV-related conditions such as cervical cancer and genital warts. Even though cancers don't develop until adulthood, infection often happens during adolescence, so vaccinating teens is an important

opportunity for prevention.

Yet, despite the safety, efficacy and importance of this vaccine, only about 40 percent of teen girls and 22 percent of teen boys complete the three-part vaccination series. We can explain these low vaccination rates through a number of reasons, which are outlined in our *Evidence to Action* brief, but some main factors are provider hesitancy to recommend the vaccine to teens, especially younger teens for whom the vaccine is routinely recommended, and parental concerns that the vaccine is unnecessary or could encourage sexual activity. Yet, the evidence shows us that when providers are prompted to talk about the vaccine, vaccination rates go up. In addition, as shared in our brief, there is no correlation between HPV series initiation and increased teen sexual activity.

HPV vaccines are most effective when given as a part of the larger series of vaccines recommended for 11-12 year olds when parents and providers play a key role in helping teens make decisions about vaccination. Emphasizing these important messages for providers, parents and teens is crucial.

Meningococcal and Tdap Vaccines

Teens also need the meningococcal vaccine, which can prevent serious life-threatening conditions like meningitis, and the tetanus-diphtheria-acelluar pertussis (Tdap) vaccine to prevent tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis. Some research shows that teens don't necessarily believe that they need these vaccines because they don't think they are at risk for contracting the diseases these vaccines prevent. However, teens are one of the groups at highest risk of meningococcal disease and can still get pertussis and spread it to others. Thankfully, about 79 percent of teens receive the meningococcal vaccine and 84 percent receive the Tdap vaccine. Interestingly, these rates far surpass vaccination rates for HPV even though teens are more likely to be infected by HPV. We will continue to push until all teens have an opportunity to be protected from these vaccine-preventable diseases.

Flu

Finally, teens also need their recommended annual flu vaccine, along with everyone older than age six. Unfortunately during the 2016-2017 flu season, only about 47 percent of youth ages 13-17 were vaccinated, which was the lowest out of any group under the age of 18. Teens may not think that influenza can make them very sick, but anyone, even healthy young people, can get a severe flu infection. Despite doubts about how well flu vaccines work, they are our most effective prevention tool. Much more can be done to help teens make the healthy choice to vaccinate themselves against the flu every year. Especially following this year's severe flu season, it will be even more important for us to understand how and why teens make the decisions they do about flu vaccines.

Understanding How College Students Think About Vaccines

One of my current projects focuses on understanding college students' perceptions about vaccines. Increasing vaccine uptake among this group is especially important given the fact that these youth are more likely to participate in lots of social activities and live in close proximity to other students. Both of these factors increase the likelihood that they will be exposed to or transmit communicable diseases, some of which could be prevented through the HPV, meningococcal and flu vaccines.

I think it's important to understand what college-aged students know about vaccines recommended for their age group and whether they make a decision to get things like the HPV, meningococcal or annual flu vaccine themselves or rely on the advice of their parents or primary care providers back home. This research should inform where we target efforts to most effectively increase vaccination in this young adult population, for example educating teens, their parents, and primary care pediatricians on the best vaccines for teens or working with school health centers to improve campus outreach and awareness on the importance of vaccines.

The decisions that youth make during adolescence can have far-reaching implications for their health later on in life. During this Global Teen Health Week and beyond, we hope you will join us in promoting vaccination as an important piece of that puzzle. Understanding how teens value and think about vaccines will inform our efforts to support vaccine uptake in this population as they begin making health care decisions for themselves.

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