

Teen Vaccination Coverage Increasing

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] Hi, this is Tyler Sonnichsen and I'm here today with Dr. Melinda Wharton who is the acting director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Wharton, what will we be discussing today?

[Doctor Wharton] Well we'll be talking about the new data we've just received from the National Immunization Survey looking at vaccine coverage among teens in the United States during 2008.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] So what do the National Immunization Survey data tell us about teen immunization rates in the U.S. right now?

[Doctor Wharton] There's good news and there's still more work to do. Rates have gone up for the three vaccines that were recently recommended specifically for pre-teens. These are vaccines that prevent meningococcal meningitis, a vaccine that prevents pertussis along with tetanus and diphtheria, as well as the human papillomavirus vaccine. For the meningococcal vaccine and the pertussis, tetanus, and diphtheria vaccine, coverage rates are now about 40 percent and that's a good increase over last year.

The rates also went up for the HPV vaccine which is recommended for girls to prevent cervical cancer. There's been an increase in the number of girls who have started the series – it's gone up from about 25 percent last year to about 37 percent this year for starting the series, but 18 percent of girls in the survey finished all three doses. This is a nice increase from last year, it definitely indicates progress but of course there's still work to do.

You know parents are used to taking those young children to the pediatrician, but it's not something that, really, parents are in the habit of doing yet for kids at this age. And so this is really a good opportunity for parents to check with their provider to see if their child is due for a visit and then, at that visit, the doctor can do the other things that need to be done for children that age to help keep them healthy.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] That does sound like good progress. And why is it important to get the rates even higher?

[Doctor Wharton] Well each of these vaccines prevents potentially deadly infections. And in fact, vaccination is the best way to protect children from these diseases. They not only can protect the child him or herself but also other people. We can't completely prevent pertussis in young children because children need to have at least two doses of pertussis vaccine to be protected, and they're not going to get two or three doses until they're four or six months of age, even if they get vaccinated on time. So we continue to see pertussis cases among children under four months of age and we think some of those cases will be preventable if we can get the people around them vaccinated. And pertussis still occurs in outbreaks in school age kids; so if we can get that under control, then it may be there'll be less pertussis in the community.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] So what is the recommended age for adolescents to get vaccinated?

[Doctor Wharton] There are three vaccines that we recommend routinely to be given at 11 to 12 years of age and those are the vaccines that protect against meningococcal meningitis, pertussis along with tetanus and diphtheria, and human papillomavirus; and the last one, the vaccine, we only recommend for girls. If these vaccines are not given by 11 to 12 years of age, which is the routine age, then we would recommend that they be given as soon as possible afterwards, so that children don't fall behind and are protected at the earliest age possible. And of course we have recommendations for other vaccines to be given in childhood, like the measles, mumps, rubella vaccine, hepatitis B vaccine, and varicella vaccine, and if those vaccines weren't given in childhood, then this early adolescent visit at 11 to 12 years of age is a great time for parents and the immunization provider to go over that immunization record and make sure that the child has received all the vaccines that are recommended.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] So besides getting vaccines, why do pre-teens and teens need checkups?

[Doctor Wharton] Well, you know parents of young children know to take their child to the pediatrician. It's part of what they tell you to do in those books you read while you're pregnant. But when your child gets to teenage years, it's not part of what you do, to take them to the doctor so regularly. And kids this age actually don't end up going to the doctor very often, and yet there are a lot of things that are important for children's health at this age that the pediatrician or family physician will do if your child goes in for those health visits. So we hope that these new vaccines that are now recommended for this age group will get kids into the pediatrician or the family physician so that all the other important things that can help maintain the child's health can be delivered.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] So if a family wants to get their teen vaccinated but is concerned about the cost, what options do they have?

[Doctor Wharton] Well, they can start by asking their healthcare provider about the Vaccines for Children Program, or VFC. This is a federal program that provides vaccine at no charge to the parents, for many children who are eligible for the program up through 18 years of age. More than 40,000 doctors are enrolled in the program, and if families need help locating a doctor who participates in VFC, they can call 1-800-CDC-INFO, I-N-F-O.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] So, that sounds like great information. Is there any other information for families regarding vaccines for teens?

[Doctor Wharton] I would suggest that they go to our Web site at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/preteen or they can call 1-800-CDC-INFO.

[Tyler Sonnichsen] Thank you very much for all the information, Dr. Wharton. This is Tyler Sonnichsen. Thank you for listening.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.