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Vaccines Are Not Just For Kids...

By
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Kingsford, Michigan – January 6, 2009. While it is important to ensure that all children are completely immunized, adults also should make sure that they are up to date on recommended vaccines. During this time of New Year's resolutions, make a promise to yourself to get caught up on any vaccines you may be missing.

We have all heard our doctor tell us to get a tetanus booster shot every 10 years because our immunity wears off (or after five years if you get a tetanus-prone injury). The tetanus shot you've been getting actually protects you against both tetanus and diphtheria. Now, because of the resurgence of the communicable disease pertussis (whooping cough) across the country, it is recommended that teens and adults make sure that one of their tetanus shots includes a booster for pertussis as well. This shot is called the Tdap (for tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis).

This is particularly important if you are around young infants, who are the most vulnerable to serious infection and hospitalization. Every year, infants are hospitalized with pertussis, which can be severe enough to cause them to turn blue with coughing, have seizures and even die from the disease. Most adults with pertussis develop a prolonged, severe cough, but older adults and those with other serious health conditions can become very ill with pertussis.

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For some time, people over 65 years of age, or those who have serious chronic conditions such as diabetes or heart disease, have known that it is important to get a 'pneumonia' shot. The national Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices now recommends that adults 19-64 years of age who are smokers or have asthma also get the vaccine. The reason is that studies have shown that just like older adults and those with health problems, smokers and asthmatics are at higher risk for serious pneumococcal infections, even if they are young and otherwise healthy.

Most of us have now also heard about Gardasil, the new vaccine to prevent infection with the most serious strains of human papillomavirus (HPV). More than 50 percent of men and women are infected with this sexually transmitted virus at some time in their lives. In its mildest form, it may cause no symptoms or cases of genital warts, but the most severe strains can actually cause cervical cancer. It is estimated that more than 70 percent of cervical cancer cases may be prevented through this vaccine. Girls and women between 11 and 26 years of age should be vaccinated to significantly reduce their risk of cervical cancer.

Next, a word about shingles. Shingles is a painful rash, often with blisters. Rarely, it can cause pneumonia, hearing problems, brain infection or even death. Shingles, also called 'Zoster,' is caused by a re-awakening of the chicken pox virus in some of the body's nerve cells. It is most common in older individuals or in people with weakened immune systems. If you live to be 85, you have about a 50-50 chance of developing shingles over your lifetime. There is now a vaccine that reduces the risk of getting shingles by half and can also make the episode less painful if it occurs in spite of vaccination. The vaccine is recommended once for everyone age 60 and over.

And finally, it's not too late to get the seasonal influenza vaccine if you haven't done so this year. Call your county health department office at (906) 774-1868 or (906) 265-9913 or your physician to arrange an appointment for a flu shot.

So, talk to your doctor about which vaccines would be helpful in keeping you healthy. It is another occasion in which the old saying is true, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

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