

THE COSTCO CONNECTION

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A shot of good health

Adults need vaccinations too

By Jodi Helmer

THINK IMMUNIZATIONS ARE just for kids? You could be missing out on important protections against illnesses and infections. Rolling up your sleeve for a shot could also save your life: Approximately 50,000 adults die in the United States every year from vaccine-preventable diseases, according to the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (www.nfid.org).

Despite the benefits of vaccinations, adults are under-immunized. "There is a lack of awareness about the need [for adults to be vaccinated] and which vaccines are required," explains Deborah Wexler, M.D., executive director of the Immunization Action Coalition (www.immunize.org), a nonprofit organization working to increase immunization rates through education.

There are also misconceptions about how immunizations work. Vaccines are made from small amounts of bacteria or viruses that mimic the disease, causing your immune system to build up antibodies to fight the illness if you're infected. While some vaccinations, such as the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine, offer lifetime protection, others, including the influenza vaccine, need to be repeated. In other words, it's a mistake to think the vaccines you got in childhood are still protecting you.

The types of vaccines you need depend on a number of considerations, including your immunization history, age and risk factors. In general, there are three categories of vaccines to consider.

Childhood vaccines

Even if you received vaccines for MMR, tetanus/diphtheria/pertussis, meningococcal disease and pneu-

mococcal disease as a child, it might be time for a booster shot to re-up your protection. There is also a chance that an important childhood immunization such as chicken pox was missed, increasing your risk of contracting a vaccine-preventable illness. "If you've lost your [immunization] records and are unsure about whether you were vaccinated as a child, there is no harm in getting revaccinated as an adult," says Raymond A. Strikas, M.D., senior adviser in the immunization services division at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov).

New vaccines

There is a good chance that new vaccines have been developed and vaccine recommendations have changed since your last round of immunizations. For example, most adults have never received the hepatitis B vaccine because it wasn't part of the immunization schedule until 1991. The zoster vaccine to protect against shingles has been available for only the last five years. Talk to your healthcare provider to find out which new (or newly recommended) vaccines might be right for you.

Age-appropriate vaccines

Up-to-date immunizations are especially important as you get older because your immune system weakens, making you more susceptible to contracting vaccine-preventable diseases. The zoster vaccine is recommended for all adults over 50; a booster of the MMR vaccine is also suggested for this age group. Adults over the age of 65 also need additional pneumococcal immunization to protect against bacterial pneumonia.

Vaccinations are an important part of preventive healthcare for all adults but are especially important if you're in a high-risk group. International travelers and healthcare workers are more apt to come in contact with vaccine-preventable diseases, increasing their risk of infection. Those with compromised immune systems, including diabetics and smokers, are in danger of suffering from infection-related complications.

No matter what your health history, Strikas believes up-to-date immunizations are essential. "There is no reason to risk illness, possible hospitalization and sometimes death when there are effective vaccines available," he says. ☐

Jodi Helmer is a fully vaccinated freelance writer in Charlotte, North Carolina.

For more information about vaccinations, go to www.cdc.gov/vaccines.

MEDIA BAKERY

Health CALENDAR August Immunization Awareness Month

THE CENTERS for Disease Control and Prevention uses the month of August to remind everyone to get caught up on shots. Be aware of the basic requirements, plus whatever your doctor might recommend.

- Children (under age 6): measles, polio, chicken pox and hepatitis
- Preteens (11- and 12-year-olds): tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough and meningitis
- Adults: tetanus every 10 years; annual flu shot at age 50; one-time pneumonia shot at age 65

The Costco Connection

Many Costco pharmacists are trained and certified to provide vaccination and immunization services, but not all Costco pharmacies can offer all vaccines. Call ahead (www.costco.com/warehouse/locator.aspx) to determine the range of services provided at your local Costco pharmacy, as well as:

- Availability of vaccines in your state
- Age requirements: typically age 12 and older, but varies by state; parental consent is required for those younger than 18
- Walk-in service versus appointment required for vaccination

Back-to-school vaccinations are available now. Seasonal influenza vaccinations start in September. Shingles (zoster) vaccine is available year-round.