

Catching up to stay ahead

Getting back on track with routinely recommended vaccinations

By Melody A. Butler, BSN, RN, CIC, and Heather M. Brandt, PhD

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has resulted in dramatic declines in adolescent vaccinations, which began in March 2020 and continue one year later. According to data recently shared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the effects of the pandemic on adolescent vaccination have been striking. Routinely administered infant and child vaccinations also have suffered.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices routinely recommends three vaccines (in addition to seasonal influenza vaccination) for adolescents between age 11 and 12 years to protect against tetanus, diphtheria, acellular pertussis (Tdap); human papillomavirus (HPV); and meningococcal disease. Tdap vaccination rates are down 21% compared with previous years, HPV vaccination rates are down 21%, and meningococcal vaccination rates are down 17%. These declines represent more than 2.5 million missed doses among adolescents. A major gap between privately insured and publicly insured adolescents has emerged, highlighting the different ways in which each of us has experienced the pandemic and threats for long-term impact. An urgent need exists to ensure we catch up on missed vaccines and receive those that are due to reduce the risk of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Nurses play a prominent role in addressing missed or delayed vaccinations. The back-to-school period in 2020, when most adolescents traditionally obtain vaccinations, was anything but normal. With the advent of COVID-19 vaccinations and students transitioning from virtual to in-person schooling, adolescents may be returning to the classroom without routinely recommended vaccines. This dangerous situation could leave students unprotected from diseases, such as meningitis and pertussis. Families need to be educated that the time for vaccines and boosters is now.

Nurses can use their expertise and influence to encourage vaccinations among adolescent populations. (Access resources at hvproundtable.org/get-involved/healthplans.)

- Use every encounter to ask families about vaccinations as an opportunity to catch up on one more adolescent.
- Identify adolescents who have missed doses, and contact their families to schedule appointments.
- Reassure families of the precautions in place for obtaining vaccinations safely.
- Proactively encourage family members, friends, neighbors, and the broader community to schedule and obtain routinely recommended vaccinations.
- Educate the community by writing op-eds for local publications, sharing pro-vaccine social media posts, and reaching out to parent and teacher organizations about sending home reminders to students and providing information at meetings.

Not all nurses work in settings that offer routine vaccinations, but every nurse plays a part to ensure missed or delayed vaccinations are scheduled and received. We know nurses are trusted messengers and frequently consulted sources of health information. Your opinions and recommendations matter to your family, friends, and community. You have a responsibility and obligation to participate in this call to action. The COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on all of us, and it will take all of us to catch up and stay ahead of vaccine-preventable diseases. We all can play a role in preserving the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

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