How to boost vaccination rates during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Telehealth is taking care of many patient needs, but with flu season nearing doctors won’t be able to vaccinate patients through cyberspace.

And with COVID-19 continuing to surge, it will be more important than ever to vaccinate patients against the flu to reduce the number of people using the nation’s health resources that are so heavily taxed during the pandemic.

“The more people we can get vaccinated and protected and get them out of [the health care] system, wonderful. And then, obviously, with the overlap of populations and symptoms, in terms of the two diseases, if we can have people vaccinated, that's one less diagnostic criteria that we can look at as people come in with respiratory illness,” chief strategy officer of the Immunization Action Coalition L.J. Tan, PhD, MS, said during a recent episode of “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

With these concerns in mind—along with the knowledge that there have been pandemic-related disruptions to routine childhood vaccination—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is asking for physicians to start planning now for distributing the flu vaccine to patients, including those who may be wary of coming into the office for a vaccine.

CDC ramps up resources

CDC Director Robert R. Redfield, MD, and the agency’s director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases Nancy Messonnier, MD, recently sent a letter physicians and other health partners nationwide asking for help in boosting immunization rates for flu and other diseases.

The letter outlines the following resources to help achieve these goals:

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Review updated influenza vaccine recommendations as they become available and identify strategies to improve influenza vaccination coverage, especially among those at high risk for influenza complications.

Help support parents’ vaccine decisions by sharing resources from the CDC’s Vaccinate with Confidence framework, including resources on effective vaccine conversations and creating a culture of immunization in the practice.

Read and share the newly issued Interim Guidance for Immunization Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Consider using social media outreach materials to educate parents about the importance of vaccines, which can be found at Resources for Encouraging Vaccinations During COVID-19 Pandemic.

Inform parents about the Vaccines for Children program that helps families who recently lost insurance or are experiencing economic hardship in accessing vaccines at no cost.

Encouragement via telehealth

There are many things physicians can do during telehealth visits to help ensure patients get flu vaccinations when they become available, Atlanta internist Sandra A. Fryhofer, MD, an adjunct clinical associate professor of medicine at Emory University School of Medicine and an AMA Board of Trustees member, said during the AMA COVID-19 daily video update.

“We can reinforce the importance of vaccination and review which vaccinations a patient needs and come up with a plan, be creative, be efficient. Remember that physician recommendation is a great motivator for vaccination,” she said. “You can administer vaccination during an in-person visit for another reason. You can give more than one vaccination at a time.”

Dr. Fryhofer also said she expects there will be more drive-thru flu vaccination clinics this fall.

“Remind your patients to dress appropriately for the occasion. If they wear a sleeveless shirt, it's going to be much easier to administer that vaccine,” she said.

More AMA resources
The AMA’s STEPS Forward™ open-access module Adult Vaccinations: Team-Based Immunization teaches physicians ways to save time and prevent disease with an immunization program. The module, which can be taken for 0.5 continuing medical education credit, outlines six steps to creating a successful team-based adult immunization program, answers commonly asked questions about team-based adult immunization programs and provides downloadable tools and training.

The module is part of the AMA Ed Hub, an online platform with top-quality CME and education that supports professional development needs of physicians and other health care professionals.

You can stay up to speed on the AMA’s COVID-19 advocacy efforts and track the fast-moving pandemic with the AMA's COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of the most up-to-date resources from JAMA Network™, the CDC, and the World Health Organization.