

6 things doctors can do to boost flu vaccination among children

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Sara Berg, MS

Senior News Writer

More than half a million children in the U.S. have had COVID-19, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. As the rate of new cases among children rises, physicians continue to work with parents to get kids the immunizations they need to avoid a national “twindemic” of influenza and COVID-19.

The AMA, Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend that all eligible children 6 months of age and older receive their flu vaccinations by the end of October. AMA member Gregory Blaschke, MD, a pediatrician in Portland, Oregon, shared how physicians can get more children the vaccinations they need for flu season and beyond.

Address safety amid pandemic

Patients are rightly trying to stay home and avoid crowds during the pandemic. So physician practices and health care organizations are obliged to provide “a lot of reassurance and running through what we have done to keep them safe,” said Dr. Blaschke, professor of pediatrics at Oregon Health and Science University School of Medicine. “There are things that we do like—most everything’s done by appointment so that people aren’t waiting in the waiting room.”

“Even in the hospital setting, we’re often bringing patients right back so that they don’t spend time in the waiting room,” he said. “In our big hospital waiting rooms, we have blocked off seats so that everyone’s at least six feet apart. Our waiting rooms are not the zoos they used to be.”

Learn about eight things doctors wish patients knew about flu shots.

Get parents vaccinated too

It's all about keeping children safe and that means the parents should get their vaccinations as well.

"I often will say for any newborn—but especially true during a pandemic—that this is the year for the parents to get their vaccine to cocoon the baby and make sure that everyone that routinely cares for the baby or lives in the same home gets their flu vaccine," said Dr. Blaschke. "For a while, we were only allowing the mother and one support person, but we've since loosened that up to allow two support people" in the hospital during and after a birth.

"If both parents are here, it's a convenient way for them to get their vaccines, even before they leave the hospital," said Dr. Blaschke.

Learn more from the AMA STEPS Forward™ open-access module, "Adult Vaccinations: Team-Based Immunization."

Discuss range of respiratory illnesses

For kids 6 months and older, "spend some time talking about all the respiratory illnesses that we may see this fall: whooping cough, RSV [respiratory syncytial virus], pertussis, flu, COVID," said Dr. Blaschke. "If you are sick, we may have to think about the flu, COVID, pertussis, RSV all at the same time."

"You can get infected with more than one virus or infection at the same time," he said. "But we're trying to do everything we can to get people immunized with the flu vaccine to reduce that burden—and the amount of illness—on our health care centers, hospitals and in our clinics."

Learn about nine questions your patients may have about the flu vaccine.

Make it easier for busy parents

Throughout the pandemic, there has been a lot of juggling with kids home from school or day care. To make it easier, "parents can bring in a kid for a vaccine with their siblings and we would try to do all the vaccines at once," said Dr. Blaschke. "If we're in our clinic, we're vaccinating mom and child if they both need the flu vaccine."

“We’re also working to have drive up appointments so that they don’t have to come into the clinic for all the siblings to get their shots,” he said.

Learn how teamwork and an empathic approach helped a clinic double their vaccination rate.

Start flu vaccine earlier

“Pediatricians push to start flu vaccines earlier because from 6 months to 8 years old, if they’re new to the flu vaccine, we have to try and get two vaccines into them before they’re protected before flu season,” said Dr. Blaschke. “But once the 6-month-old gets the two shots the first flu season that they’re eligible to get the vaccine, then every year thereafter, they only need one.”

Explore parents’ fear

When parents are hesitant about the flu vaccine or other immunizations, the key is to probe “why that is and what’s their fear,” said Dr. Blaschke. It is about “the influence that’s leading them to make that choice and whether or not we can help modify that choice.”

Learn more from the AMA about how to boost vaccination rates during the COVID-19 pandemic.