

Seize the opportunity to vaccinate younger kids against COVID-19

NOV 3, 2021

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The availability of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at a reduced dosage for children 5–11 years old represents another huge step forward in our journey toward ending this pandemic. Now it is time for parents to act.

Data compiled from clinical trials of the pediatric Pfizer-BioNTech formulation showed that it generated a strong immune response in children 5–11 years old that was comparable to the response generated in people 16–25 years old, while causing the same or fewer temporary side effects than those experienced by vaccinated teens. In addition, the vaccine was 90.7% effective in preventing COVID-19 in children 5–11.

As has been the case with each vaccine formulation evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration and recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, the decision to authorize this vaccine to this new age group was preceded by a rigorous and transparent review. Parents can rest easy knowing that no corners have been cut and no shortcuts taken.

The decision to authorize the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for younger children affirms that the known and potential benefits of the vaccine outweigh the known and potential risks in this population. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has already received full FDA approval for everyone 16 or older, and can also be given to 12- to 15-year-olds based on authorization by the agency.

Transmission among kids is worrisome

Although we know that children are at significantly lower risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19 than adults, COVID-19 infections among kids have risen as schools reopened for in-person learning and the Delta variant spread rapidly across the country.

Overall, more than 6.3 million children in the U.S. have tested positive for COVID-19 infection and at least 460 kids have lost their lives to the disease, according to data compiled by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children’s Hospital Association. During the week ended Oct. 21, those under 18 accounted for one-fourth of reported COVID-19 cases.

The reduced frequency of well-child checks and pediatrician visits during the pandemic has also meant that many children have not received childhood vaccines on the recommended schedule. Updated guidance from the CDC allows the COVID-19 vaccine to be given at the same time that other routine childhood vaccines are administered—so now is a great time to schedule an appointment with your child’s physician.

Mitigation efforts are effective

Children under 4, along with older children for whom COVID-19 vaccination is contraindicated, can still gain protection by following the public health measures familiar to all of us since the pandemic began: physical distancing, wearing a mask in public, washing our hands frequently and avoiding large gatherings.

It is my hope that at some point in the near future, entire families will be able to enjoy the protection against COVID-19 that only vaccination offers us. I encourage parents and guardians of children under 12, as well as anyone still deciding about becoming vaccinated against COVID-19, to consult with a physician or other qualified health care professional.

What was true about vaccines centuries ago when doctors developed a novel approach to combat smallpox remains true to this day: Vaccination offers us and our children the best defense against deadly disease.