What COVID-19 vaccination means for next AMA president’s family

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Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, was eager for his 3-year-old son Ethan to experience a plane trip and visit his grandparents again. The Food and Drug Administration’s recent authorization of COVID-19 vaccines for children older than 6 months made these choices possible for Dr. Ehrenfeld’s family.

“These vaccines have been a long time coming,” said Dr. Ehrenfeld, the AMA’s president-elect and an anesthesiologist at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. “We are so excited to be able to travel with him and take him places with the confidence, knowing that he'll be protected and unlikely to become seriously ill if he gets COVID.”

During an episode of “AMA COVID-19 Update,” Dr. Ehrenfeld discussed the importance of children under 5 getting vaccinated against COVID-19, sharing his family’s personal experience.

“A pretty easy decision”

Some parents have been hesitant to get their younger children vaccinated. Uptake among children 5–11 hasn’t been very robust since they were authorized last fall despite striking data showing the protection they offer from hospitalization and serious illness.

For Dr. Ehrenfeld’s family, “at this point in time, it was a pretty easy decision.” With so much safety data and patient experience now available on the vaccines, he and his husband felt comfortable taking Ethan to the pediatrician’s office at Children’s Wisconsin to get his shot, said Dr. Ehrenfeld, who is the AMA’s first openly gay president-elect.

The vaccines certainly have risks and there are things to be aware of. However, the protection it affords is a “no-brainer,” he emphasized.
“It's been hard over the last year or so. Even though I've been vaccinated, my husband's been vaccinated, we felt left behind as a family because our son was not,” Dr. Ehrenfeld said. Once the FDA authorized the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines for children under 5, “we jumped at the chance” for additional protection to help prevent serious illness.

Parents with concerns should discuss the vaccine options with their physician, to see if this is the right decision for their family, he added.

In an open letter, the AMA joined the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) to encourage U.S. parents and caregivers to consult their child’s physician about COVID-19 vaccination.

“COVID-19 is unpredictable, and we do not know which children will suffer severe, long-term or debilitating symptoms,” the open letter says. “Children can become severely ill from COVID-19, be hospitalized and even die. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), COVID-19 was among the leading causes of death among children the past two years. Even otherwise healthy children with no underlying medical conditions can experience both short- and long-term health complications from COVID-19 that can affect their mental and physical health and quality of life.

“Thankfully, scientists have developed effective and safe COVID-19 vaccines that prevent the most severe illness,” the physician organizations' letter adds. “These vaccines have been given to millions of adults, adolescents and children in the U.S. and around the world and have proven to be remarkably effective at preventing virus-related hospitalization and death.”

The AMA, AAP and AAFP noted in the letter that the CDC’s decision to recommend the vaccines for children older than 6 months “followed a rigorous and transparent review process, just as it did with each COVID-19 vaccine formulation authorized by the Food and Drug Administration. You can feel confident that no shortcuts were taken to develop and review these vaccines.”

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center for physicians.

Preparing for the visit

Parents may wonder whether they should choose Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech. The answer is it doesn’t really matter, said Dr. Ehrenfeld. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention isn’t recommending one over the other.

“I don't think it's a decision, frankly, that probably makes a huge difference over time,” he said.
Another concern is how young children might react to the vaccine. So far, the response has been mild among children of this age group, said Dr. Ehrenfeld. His own son seemed more bothered by the blood pressure cuff tightening on his arm than the vaccine shot in the arm. Happy to get a Band-Aid and a sticker, Ethan’s arm was just a bit sore the following day.

“Preparing a child for a vaccine—letting them know what's going to happen, not surprising them—is helpful. And then certainly helping them understand that this is something that keeps them healthy,” he said.

Supply issues have posed some challenges, but if your pediatrician or family physician doesn't have it, try the local pharmacy or health department, said Dr. Ehrenfeld. Vaccines.gov can direct parents to places with availability for kids under 5.

**Vaccination helps others too**

Physicians play a role in combating misinformation about vaccines and emphasizing their importance as a tool to fight the virus, stressed Dr. Ehrenfeld.

“One of the arguments I hear a lot is that COVID is not a serious illness in kids. There is some truth to that, but community spread is real,” he said. “Because we have this large pool of unvaccinated kids who haven't been exposed to COVID, getting them vaccinated actually helps other groups by protecting the rest of the community around them.”

Dr. Ehrenfeld’s son starts school in the fall. “We want to make sure that he can protect himself and his classmates,” he said.

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines and variants, and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.