

A Cup of Health with CDC

November 10, 2006

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Welcome to A Cup of Health with CDC, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality weekly report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds.

With influenza season almost here, it's important to remember that young children are just as vulnerable to the complications of influenza as elderly adults. According to the CDC, children under 2 years of age have an increased chance of going to the hospital because of influenza.

The CDC has been tracking the percentage of children in the U.S. who get the influenza vaccine. While their latest report indicates the percentage of children who get the influenza vaccine has been increasing, overall numbers are still quite low.

Here to discuss that report is Dr. Jeanne Santoli of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases.

Welcome to the show, Dr. Santoli.

Thank you, Matthew, it's good to be here.

Matthew Reynolds: How many children got their influenza vaccine last year?

Dr. Santoli: Well, based on information from the National Immunization Survey, which is a national survey of U.S. pre-school children, 33% of children aged 6-23 months got at least one dose of influenza vaccine, and about 18% were fully vaccinated. This is about double what the vaccination coverage was the season before, but it's still quite low, and vaccination coverage varies a lot among different states.

Matthew Reynolds: You mentioned the term "fully vaccinated". What exactly does that mean and why is it important?

Dr. Santoli: Well, children under 9 years of age who are getting a flu vaccine for the first time, require 2 doses given one month apart so that their immune systems can respond properly to the vaccine, and then in later seasons, these children will only require a single dose. Studies of young children 6-23 months have shown that they get very little protection from just a single dose of vaccine the first season that they're vaccinated. So it's very important for these first time vaccinees to get 2 doses of vaccine spaced a month apart.

Matthew Reynolds: The report says that the influenza vaccine recommendations for children have changed. How have they changed?

Dr. Santoli: Well, beginning this fall, the CDC is recommending yearly influenza vaccination to include children aged 2 years up to through their 5th birthday, as well as their household contacts and those who care for them. Previously, the recommendation was for children 6-23 months of age and their household contacts and out of home caregivers.

Matthew Reynolds: There have been reports of influenza vaccine shortages or delays in past years. What's the supply like this year?

Dr. Santoli: Well, we're expecting about 110 to 115 million doses of influenza vaccine for this season, and that's about 17 million more doses of vaccine than we have had distributed in any other year. So we think we'll have a lot of vaccine available, but among the newly recommended group of children, those who are aged 2 through their 5th birthday, there is limited vaccine available for children who are 3 years of age because there's a very limited number of products that can be used in children of this age.

Matthew Reynolds: Well Dr. Santoli, what advice can you give to parents about the influenza vaccination?

Dr. Santoli: Well, although many people typically think of influenza as a disease that effects the elderly, young children are also at high risk of complications that result in hospitalization or visits to a doctor or emergency department, and that's the reason the CDC is expanding it's recommendations for vaccinating young children, as well as their household contacts and their out of home caregivers. The best way to protect young children against influenza is to bring them in for vaccination and bring them back in a month for their second dose if they're getting vaccinated for the first time. Parents, other household members, and out of home caregivers should also be vaccinated, and since children who are less than 6 months of age cannot get the influenza vaccine, and since they're particularly at high risk of complications, it's especially important to vaccinate their household contacts and caregivers as well.

Matthew Reynolds: Are there programs in place to help pay for influenza vaccine for children that are recommended for the vaccine but whose parents can't afford to pay for it?

Dr. Santoli: There are. Influenza vaccine is included in a program called The Vaccines for Children program which serves our most vulnerable children - those without health insurance, those enrolled in Medicaid, as well as American Indian and Alaskan Native children. They can receive influenza vaccine and other vaccines in their doctor's office if their doctor is part of this program, and there are a number of state and local programs that also provide vaccines for children whose parents can't afford to pay for them.

Matthew Reynolds: Dr. Santoli, thanks for talking with us today.

Dr. Santoli: Thank you.

That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for A Cup of Health with CDC.

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