



PARENTS PACK

MONTHLY UPDATES ABOUT
VACCINES ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

FEATURE ARTICLE – GETTING VACCINATED AS AN ADULT: WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

March 2024

People are generally aware that children need vaccines, but until relatively recently, many adults often did not consider that they might also need vaccines. If we were trying to find something positive that emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic, we might point to an increased awareness about adult vaccines. But, unfortunately, the public health and medical infrastructure for adult vaccines is not as well developed as that for children. So, where does that leave adults trying to make sure they are protected against vaccine-preventable diseases?

What vaccines do I need?

Adults should get in the habit of asking their primary healthcare providers whether they need any vaccines at *every* visit. Of course, not all adults regularly go to their primary doctor. So, some other options can include:

- **Changing your habits to include at least one annual visit to your primary care doctor.** This approach will ensure not only that your vaccination needs are met, but also that you have bloodwork and other aspects of your health checked on a regular basis.
- **Asking other healthcare providers that you see.** This can include specialists that you visit more regularly, like gynecologists, pulmonologists, cardiologists, or those being seen during illnesses or injuries, such as urgent care or emergency room physicians. However, be aware that this approach may be limited in its effectiveness. Because, for example, while these providers may offer guidance based on a specific condition or situation, such as getting a pneumococcal vaccine if you have asthma or a tetanus vaccine if you are being treated for a wound, they may not be well-versed on your complete medical history or the immunization schedule in general, so you could miss some opportunities for protection or get vaccines that are not of much benefit. Immunize.org offers a useful tool to help healthcare providers determine a patient’s vaccine needs; “Before You Vaccinate Adults, Consider Their ‘H-A-L-O!’” [bit.ly/consider-HALO] can help these providers more quickly identify vaccines that you should consider.
- **Using tools and information offered by groups focused on vaccination.** For example, the Centers for Disease Control and prevention (CDC) offers a free, online vaccine assessment tool [bit.ly/adult-vax-quiz]. Likewise, information about adult vaccines is offered by other groups, including this Immunize.org sheet [bit.ly/adult-vax-info] and this Vaccine Education Center (VEC) booklet [bit.ly/adult-vax-booklet]. Information of this type can prepare you to ask pertinent questions and have informed conversations with a healthcare provider. Immunize.org also has several Q&A sheets related to specific conditions [bit.ly/vax-resources], including diabetes, pregnancy, lung disease, and more. However, one important consideration when seeking information from outside groups is to ensure that it is grounded in science and based on accepted medical standards. You can ask your healthcare provider for good sources of information or check the “Resources for Evaluating Information” [bit.ly/eval-info-resources] or the “Vaccine Websites” [bit.ly/vaccine-websites] pages of the VEC’s website.

A note about vaccination records

When you talk to healthcare providers about which vaccines you need, they may ask about your vaccination history. If you have old immunization records, take them to healthcare visits with new providers or keep a picture or list with you in the event you require emergency care, such as for an accident causing a wound. If you are not sure where your record is, review this list of “Tips for Locating Old Immunization Records” [bit.ly/vaccine-records] offered by Immunize.org.

Regardless of whether you locate old immunization records, it is important to keep a list of previous vaccinations in the same way that you may keep a list of your medications — even if you start a new list with your next vaccination. You will want to record the date you were vaccinated, where you got the vaccine, and which vaccine you received, including which disease or diseases it protects against. It is worth having the healthcare provider confirm the vaccine-specific information since sometimes there is more than one type of the same vaccine.

TRIVIA CORNER

Who should get the shingles vaccine?

- A. All adults 50 years and older who have not had the vaccine
- B. All adults 40 years and older who have not had the vaccine
- C. All adults 60 years and older who have not had the vaccine
- D. All adults 30 years and older who have not had the vaccine

Where can I get vaccinated?

After figuring out which vaccines you need, your next question may be where you can get them. In some cases, your primary care provider will offer vaccines, but if they do not, you have some other options:

- **Local pharmacy** – Today, many pharmacists administer vaccines; however, two things are important to remember. First, you should confirm that your doctor agrees you need a particular vaccine and it's safe to get based on your medical history. Second, you should inquire whether the pharmacy you plan to go to has the vaccine you need and whether you need an appointment. It is also important to ask whether you need additional doses and, if so, what amount of time should separate the doses.
- **Local health department** – Your local public health center may also offer the vaccines that you need. To check, contact them and also find out their hours, location, and whether you need an appointment. You can find your state health department immunization office on the “State Immunization Websites” page [bit.ly/state-websites] on Immunize.org, and they should be able to provide information about the health center located near you. You can also use the resources on the “Where To Get Vaccinated” page [bit.ly/get-vaccines] on the vaccineinformation.org website.
- **Immunization clinics** – For annual vaccines, like influenza, you may hear about clinics being offered by public health officials, immunization coalitions, churches, non-profit groups, employers or nearby health systems. Watch for announcements around your neighborhood, from news sources or from your social network.
- **Travel medicine clinics** – If you need vaccines because you are traveling internationally, you may need to locate a travel medicine specialist since vaccines that are not routinely recommended are typically not stocked by other types of healthcare providers. Travel medicine specialists offer a wealth of information beyond your vaccines needs. By discussing details of your trip, they will also typically be able to provide tips for being prepared during travel and what to watch for after travel. Both the International Society of Travel Medicine [bit.ly/ISTM-clinic-directory] and the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene [bit.ly/consultants-directory] offer online directories for locating these medical specialists.

When you get vaccines at any place other than your primary care provider's office, two considerations are important:

1. Get details from your provider regarding whether there is a particular brand or dose of the vaccine that you should get. For example, since several influenza vaccines are available, your healthcare provider may recommend a particular type, such as a high-dose version if you are an older adult.
2. After getting vaccinated, it is important to promptly provide your healthcare provider with the details, so the vaccination becomes part of your medical record.

What will my vaccines cost?

Another common consideration is the cost of vaccines. In some cases, vaccines may be free. Your situation will depend on the type of health coverage you have, why you need the vaccines, and where you get them. For example, if you need vaccines because of an upcoming international trip, the vaccines may not be covered by your health insurance even though routine vaccines are covered. If you are without health insurance, you may be able to get discounted or free vaccines by going to a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) or Rural Health Center (RHC). We recommend inquiring about the cost of a vaccination when you make your appointment, and if there will be a fee, you may want to check for alternative options that offer better pricing. Vaccinate Your Family offers a useful online tool for determining how to afford vaccines [bit.ly/paying-for-vax].

In sum

We hope that the resources in this article can assist you in traversing the current adult vaccine landscape. And, we also hope that over time, the infrastructure for adult vaccines matures, making the adult vaccine experience more seamless.

For links to resources in the Feature Article, please visit bit.ly/March2024FA.

TRIVIA ANSWER

The correct answer is A. All adults 50 years of age and older should receive the shingles vaccine if they have not had a dose previously.

Go to vaccine.chop.edu/trivia to play Just the Vax, the Vaccine Education Center's trivia game, where you can find this question and others like it.

