

What You Should Know About Adult Immunizations

Vaccinations aren't just "kid's stuff"; keeping your immunizations up to date is a lifelong job. Your childhood shots don't necessarily protect you for life, and you may need boosters during adulthood. Also, special circumstances may require that you get other immunizations as well. It's all too easy to neglect these preventive measures, but remember, immunizations not only stop you from catching diseases, they also stop you from spreading them to family, friends, and co-workers.

What Are Immunizations?

Immunizations, which are generally given as injections, protect you from diseases. Each injection contains small amounts of a weakened form of the disease, prompting your immune system to form *antibodies* to fight the disease in the future. And even though an immunization may not prevent a disease entirely, it can greatly decrease its severity. Some immunizations are given only once, while others require a series of shots.

Why Are Immunizations Necessary?

People often have the wrong idea about vaccinations. One thing people believe is that getting a vaccination gives you

the disease. In reality, though, most vaccinations are killed viruses, meaning that it is completely impossible to get the disease. Even when the vaccine is live, though, it is weakened so much that a person with a normal immune system almost never gets sick from it.

Other people think that vaccinations for diseases like polio are no longer necessary. This is simply wrong. It's thanks to immunizations that polio and other deadly diseases have virtually disappeared in the United States—but this doesn't mean we can let our guard down. The only way to keep these diseases under control is to make sure that everyone is immunized.

Immunizations protect you and those around you from life-threatening diseases, reducing the chance that an epidemic can develop. They cost very little (much less than treating the diseases they prevent), and they have very few risks. Finally, many immunizations are required by law.

Are There Any Risks Associated With Immunizations?

Most people have no ill effects from immunizations. However, minor side effects that occasionally occur may include:

- Redness, mild swelling, and/or sore-

ness at the injection site

- Low-grade fever
- Drowsiness
- Irritability
- Loss of appetite
- Mild rash 7 to 14 days after injection
- Transient joint pain.

Serious side effects are very rare, and your chances of having a dangerous reaction are minimal compared with the risks you face if you catch the disease. Such severe reactions may involve a very high fever (over 104.5° F) or difficulty breathing, and should be reported to your doctor immediately.

What Are the Current Recommendations For Adult Immunization?

If for some reason you never received the standard vaccinations as a child, tell your doctor so that you can discuss the best course of action for your individual situation. For those who have received the standard childhood vaccinations, recommendations for adult immunizations will depend on your general health status. The federal government, working with major physicians' groups, has issued recommendations for adults aged 19 years or older. In general, immunizations needed by adults include varicella (chicken pox) vaccine (if you never had chicken pox), measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine, tetanus-diphtheria (Td) vaccine, and hepatitis B vaccines (for those at risk). Adults aged 50 years or older should receive an influenza ("flu") vaccination annually, and those aged 65 years or older need pneumococcus (pneumonia) vaccinations as well. Specific recommendations are as follows:

This Patient Handout was prepared by Patricia L. Van Horn using materials from Primack BA, Zimmerman RK. Influenza and Other Vaccinations Important for Women. The Female Patient 2004;29(10); the American Academy of Family Physicians/Family Doctor (<http://familydoctor.org/>); the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/National Immunization Program (<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/default/htm>); and WebMD (<http://www.webmd.com>).

Adult Immunizations

Diphtheria-tetanus (Td, given every 10 years)

- All adults.

Varicella (chicken pox)

- All adults who never had chicken pox.

Hepatitis A

- People traveling to a foreign country with poor sanitation
- People living in a state with a high incidence of hepatitis A (consult your doctor)
- People who use intravenous (IV) recreational drugs
- Homosexual men
- People who work with infected animals
- People with clotting disorders such as hemophilia who receive blood products from human donors
- People with liver disease.

Hepatitis B

- Health care and public safety workers who may be exposed to blood or blood products
- Residents and staff at institutions serving known sufferers or carriers
- People planning to travel for more than 6 months to China, Southeast Asia, Africa, and other areas with high infection rates (consult your doctor)
- People with medical conditions that put them at risk, such as kidney disease requiring dialysis and clotting disorders like hemophilia requiring human blood products
- IV drug users
- Homosexual men
- People with multiple sex partners or a history of sexually transmitted diseases
- Household contacts and sex partners of hepatitis B carriers
- Prison inmates.

Influenza (given annually)*

- People aged 50 years or older
- People living in nursing homes
- People with chronic diseases such as diabetes, lung, heart, or kidney conditions, or human immunodeficiency virus
- People who use medications to sup-

press their immune system

- All pregnant women
- People who live or work with those at high risk, such as the elderly, the sick, and children
- Health care workers
- Home care workers
- People who provide essential community services
- Students living in dormitories
- People traveling to the southern hemisphere between April and September, or to the tropics at any time of year.

**Influenza vaccine should not be given to people with a severe allergy to eggs or egg products.*

Measles-mumps-rubella

- People born in 1957 or later
- All women of childbearing age (adolescent girls and premenopausal women) who do not have acceptable evidence of rubella immunity, such as a blood test showing the rubella antibody or written proof of vaccination
- Health care workers
- College students
- Frequent international travelers.

Pneumococcus (given every 10 years)

- People aged 65 years or older
- People with chronic diseases (heart, lung, or kidney conditions; diabetes, cancer, and immune system disorders)
- People with no spleen or a damaged spleen
- People who live in areas or among social groups with a higher risk (including Alaskan natives and some Native Americans).

Polio**

- People who travel to areas of the world where polio is common
- Health care workers who have contact with infected people
- Laboratory workers who handle the polio virus.

***Otherwise, routine polio vaccination is not recommended for adults living in the United States.*

What About Immunizations During Pregnancy?

The best time for vaccinations is before you conceive. Therefore, every woman who is considering pregnancy, or who is sexually active and not using contraception, should review her immunizations with her doctor and update them as necessary. Generally, pregnant women should make sure that they're protected against tetanus and diphtheria. They should also receive a flu shot if they are pregnant during flu season. Pregnant women with chronic medical conditions and those at high risk of exposure (like health care workers) should make sure that their pneumonia, hepatitis A, and hepatitis B vaccinations are in order. *Women should not receive the MMR or varicella vaccines during pregnancy.*

What Types Of Immunizations Are Necessary For Foreign Travel?

This depends on where you're going and for how long. Generally, travel to less developed countries (that is, parts of Africa, Asia, South America, and Central America) involves more immunizations, and may include vaccinations against diseases like yellow fever and typhoid. You should consult your doctor or your local health department; the most important thing is to plan ahead, allowing time for a series of shots if necessary.

Resources

National Immunization Program

<http://www.cdc.gov/nip>

Traveler's Health: National Center for Infectious Disease

<http://www.cdc.gov/travel>