**IMMUNIZATIONS NEWSLETTER**

PROVIDING GSA MEMBERS WITH UPDATES ON ADULT IMMUNIZATIONS

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Developed by The Gerontological Society of America

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**BREAKING NEWS**

- A measure of antigenic distance between influenza B strains included in vaccines and circulating strains may be useful in predicting the need for updating the annually adjusted vaccine formulation, according to a recently published study (*Vaccine*. 2016;34:4610–7).

- Do people with obesity have decreased responses to hepatitis B vaccine? Possibly, according to an in-press meta-analysis (*Vaccine*. 2016; 10.1016/j.vaccine.2016.08.027). In 16 previous studies, the authors found an odds ratio for nonresponse of 2.46 among those with obesity. A 2010 study published in *Pediatrics* (125:e508–12) showed that longer needles may be needed to reach intramuscular tissue during administration of hepatitis B vaccine and thereby achieve higher titers in adolescents with obesity.

- Health care providers could use communication skills training to enhance their explicit recommendations regarding vaccines, according to an analysis of content conveyed during adolescent visits to safety-net clinics (*Patient Educ Couns.* 2016; 10.1016/j.pec.2016.06.027). A newly developed tool for describing strength and content of provider recommendations showed that most recommendations for human papillomavirus vaccine were weak and used a participatory rather than presumptive introduction.

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**HEALTHY AGING MONTH: PROMOTING VACCINES**

September is Healthy Aging Month, and this annual celebration provides a great opportunity to reframe and refocus errant ideas people have about getting older. As people live longer, we’re looking for ways to stay active, positive, and inspired about the joys each day brings.

It’s no secret that noncommunicable diseases—cardiovascular conditions, cancers, and immunologic disorders—become more common as we age. Behind that fact, though, is something people may not think about. One of the main reasons lifespans are lengthening is that we aren’t dying earlier of infectious diseases. Two medical miracles—vaccines and anti-infective agents—are among the innovations we have to thank for longer life.

As the challenges of antibiotic resistance increase in frequency and severity, vaccines play an even more important role...
in maintaining health and preventing death. Several adult vaccines are helping older people develop and enhance their innate abilities to fight infection, and new products are coming down the research-and-development pike. September is the perfect time for vaccine advocates to spread the word.

HEALTH SCIENCES

As the leaves begin to change colors each fall, Americans and others in the Northern Hemisphere are increasingly aware that it’s time to get their flu shots. A health message being promoted to older Americans now is that it’s also time to make sure they have received both pneumococcal vaccines. After all, it’s hard to be positive, stand up straight, and walk like a vibrant, healthy person (3 of the 10 tips for reinventing yourself during Healthy Aging Month) when you’re coughing, running a fever, or lying in a hospital bed.

Coming off the mildest influenza season in 4 years, Americans could be complacent about getting their flu shots this year. Vaccine advocates will need to double up on the “protect yourself and protect your family” message this year.

The past season also had a very late peak in activity. Influenza infections occurred most frequently in March (see Figure 1), one of the latest peaks over the past two decades, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Vaccine effectiveness was high in most age groups, including adults aged 65 years and older, and that undoubtedly contributed to the lower number of influenza cases.

Pneumococcal vaccines are confusing to patients. Health promotion messages are simple though: If you’re 65 or older and haven’t received a pneumococcal vaccine since turning 65, ask your primary care provider or pharmacist about getting the first pneumococcal vaccine with your influenza shot this season and ask for the second pneumococcal vaccine next season. Details about the vaccines are online, including why they need to be administered a year apart and which one should be given first.

SOCIAL RESEARCH/POLICY/PRACTICE

The shingles or herpes zoster vaccine is another important immunization for seniors. Recommended by the CDC for those aged 60 years or older, this vaccine lowers patients’ risk of developing shingles and its painful and oftentimes prolonged complication, postherpetic neuralgia. The impact on patients’ quality of life is substantial, and healthy aging is just not possible when the pain of this condition is present day in and day out.
Medicare coverage of the shingles vaccine is problematic from a policy standpoint. Because the vaccine became available after Medicare launched a prescription drug benefit, it is covered under Part D. Seniors who do not elect Part D coverage must pay out of pocket for this vaccine.

Further, Part D is essentially a pharmacy benefit. That means the vaccine is available primarily in pharmacies, because physicians do not participate in this part of the Medicare program. Yet pharmacists in several states need an individual prescription to provide the vaccine (other states allow pharmacist vaccination under protocol with a physician or other prescriber). Thus, health care providers must recommend zoster vaccine to patients and give them a prescription, and patients must visit a pharmacy for the injection. Vaccination rates among older Americans have lagged in the 20% range, and this policy barrier has certainly been an obstacle for some who need this vaccine.

**BEHAVIORAL/SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Another Medicare Part D vaccine is important for adults to receive, especially if they are in close contact with newborns. A single dose of the tetanus–diphtheria–acellular pertussis (Tdap) vaccine is now recommended for all adults sometime during their lifetime (and for pregnant women during each pregnancy to provide passive immunity to their developing babies). Given the pockets of pertussis that are popping up around the country, now is a great time for all adults to go ahead and get covered with a Tdap shot.

Infants do not receive their first vaccination against pertussis until 2 months of age, leaving them susceptible to this disease. If a newborn is coming into the family, getting the Tdap vaccine is particularly important for parents, grandparents, other caregivers, and visitors coming to welcome the baby.

**BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES**

From the nation’s laboratories, renewed attention is being focused on respiratory infections caused by several pathogenic viruses other than influenza. As mentioned briefly in the July 2016 NAVP Immunizations Newsletter, a vaccine against respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is at the end of phase 3 testing and will be reviewed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in coming months.

RSV is a major source of lower respiratory tract illness in pediatric and geriatric patients, according to information presented to the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) in June 2016 by Ruth Karron, MD, of Johns Hopkins University. Each year, 150,000 infants and children and 180,000 older patients are hospitalized in the United States for RVS-mediated lower respiratory illnesses. Karron chairs the ACIP RSV Vaccines Working Group, which is preparing the committee for coverage decisions if the RSV vaccines are licensed by FDA.

The message for seniors during Healthy Aging Month is that not all respiratory infections are caused by influenza (and hence, getting a flu shot doesn’t mean they are protected from all respiratory illnesses). In addition to the debilitating lower respiratory infections, RSV can cause an upper respiratory illness that feels a lot like influenza but produces less fever and fewer systemic symptoms such as myalgia (muscle aches). For these other respiratory pathogens, help is on the way, and seniors can expect to be hearing about RSV and other new vaccines in a couple of years.
SOURCES AND RESOURCES

- Healthy Aging Month
- National Grandparents Day (September 11 this year)
- Generations United