Protect adults, too

By ACSH Staff — April 24, 2012

Getting the necessary shots is not just a concern for parents of young children; adults, too, need to keep up with their immunizations. But according to a recent survey by Walgreens, almost half of U.S. adults don’t know what shots the government recommends [1] for people in their age group.

These numbers are particularly disconcerting because vaccine-preventable illnesses account for over 40,000 adult deaths in the U.S. each year. And even when these diseases are not fatal, they can still cause a high degree of suffering. Shingles, for example, affects at least one million adults in the country every year, and can often involve an extremely painful rash yet only about one in ten adults over 60 has received the recommended shingles vaccine.

This survey reiterates what we at ACSH have been saying over and over again, says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. Adults, too, need to keep up to date with their vaccines. Here's a reminder [2]: The recommended adult vaccinations include influenza each year; tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis (Tdap) booster every 10 years; shingles at age 60 or over; and pneumonia at age 65 or over.

In other important news on adult vaccinations, a new, large study found that the shingles vaccine is safe for and well tolerated by older adults. Shingles occurs when dormant herpes zoster (chickenpox) virus becomes reactivated and causes a rash that turns into extremely painful blisters.

For this study, published in the Journal of Internal Medicine [3], researchers from the Kaiser Permanente Southern California Department of Research and Evaluation assessed data on almost 200,000 adults aged 50 or over who received the shingles vaccine. They found that, six weeks after receiving the vaccination, the participants experienced no increased risk [4] of stroke, heart disease, brain or spinal cord infections, or other serious side effects. The main side effects uncovered were mild allergic reactions that involved some redness, swelling, and mild pain at the site of injection.

In 2006, the FDA approved Merck's shingles vaccine, called Zostavax, for healthy adults aged 60 and older, and then in 2011 extended the approval to adults 50 and older. But because the CDC has only officially recommended the vaccine for adults who are at least 60, most insurance companies will cover the shingles vaccine only for this age group.

While just about 14 percent of adults 60 and over in the U.S. reported having received the shingles vaccine in 2010, this was an improvement over 2009, when only about 10 percent had received the vaccination.

ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom advises that this is not the vaccine you want to skip. I had the misfortune of getting shingles once. That was once too often. The pain was crazy.
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