

Children lead flu immunization rates, but gaps remain

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Editor's note: For the latest flu coverage, visit <https://www.aappublications.org/collection/influenza>.

If it seems like flu season just ended, you're not imagining things. Influenza remained elevated for a record-breaking 21 weeks in the 2018-'19 season.

With the next influenza season starting, infectious disease experts gathered to address urgent threats to children, adults and high-risk populations from influenza and pneumococcal disease during a National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) news conference today.

Influenza vaccination coverage has increased by more than 10% for children since the 2010 season but rose only 5% for adults during that span, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Of those children 6 months and older who died from the flu between 2010 and 2016, only 22% were fully vaccinated against the flu," said Health and Human Services Secretary Alex M. Azar II, J.D.

AAP policy recommends that children 6 months and older receive any licensed available influenza vaccine that is appropriate for their age and health status with no preference. Both inactivated influenza vaccine and live attenuated influenza vaccine are options for children.

Last season, there were 116 laboratory-confirmed pediatric deaths from influenza, some of whom were healthy children and infants. Among those at increased risk of complications from influenza are pregnant women, preterm infants, patients with chronic health conditions, young children and older adults.

Hispanic and African American adults and children also face an increased risk of flu and pneumococcal infections and death due to low vaccination coverage rates, said NFID President-Elect Patricia N. Whitley-Williams, M.D., FAAP.

She stressed the importance of physicians building trusting relationships with their patients, particularly when they share the same ethnicity.

The higher rate of influenza vaccine coverage in children than adults is "really due to our pediatricians who drive home the importance of immunizations, particularly with flu vaccine," Dr. Whitley-Williams said.

But with 63% of children vaccinated against influenza last year, "we can and must do better," she said. "We really miss an opportunity if we do not vaccinate the child but also everyone in that child's environment."

Prevention should remain the No. 1 priority, with health care professionals leading by example, Azar said.

While 81% of health care workers were immunized against the flu last season, only 68% of those working with patients in long-term care received the shot. These people put their patients at risk, he said.

“We can’t have American public health leaders coming down with the flu,” said Azar, urging health care providers to get vaccinated to protect their patients. “It doesn’t mean you’re invincible, but it does offer very substantial protection for very little effort.”

Resources

- [AAP policy statement "Recommendations for Prevention and Control of Influenza in Children, 2019-2020"](#)
- [AAP News article "Updated AAP flu policy offers more options this year"](#)

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