

Shots for the Big People

For over two hundred years medical people have successfully used vaccines to prevent some of the scourges of mankind. The first successful such treatment was developed in the late 1700s for the prevention of smallpox. Tetanus vaccine was also early on, although about 150 years later. Developed in 1924, it was widely used in World War II. About that time, mid-1940s, it began to be combined with vaccines against diphtheria (first available about 1913) and whooping cough (pertussis), and was given to babies in the well-known combination called DPT which almost all children receive today.

Another great breakthrough in prevention of horrible diseases came in 1955 when Dr. Salk produced the first successful vaccination against polio. What a blessing that was—many of us remember the dread of the late summers in the first half of the 20th century when communities virtually shut down for fear of a polio outbreak.

Later came vaccines to protect against measles, mumps and rubella (the so-called “German” measles), and finally chickenpox. And even more recent vaccines protect against Hepatitis B and H. Flu meningitis (the common meningitis of childhood). Kids today are SO lucky to be spared all these diseases—many of which caused on-going problems and even death.

Most of the above vaccines are recommended for babies and young children. But now there are a few new vaccines recommended for the older group. There are four worth mentioning.

In 2005 a vaccine was licensed for protection against invasive meningococcal disease (IMD) and recommended for people ages 11 to 55. Each year there are between 1400 and 3000 cases of IMD, which may not be huge numbers, but some 14% of cases die and about 20% of the survivors have severe on-going damage, including possible amputations, hearing loss, neurological disabilities and other serious problems. This vaccine is particularly recommended for young adults living in close quarters, such as college dormitories or Army barracks.

The second new vaccine is for the prevention of cervical cancer.



This vaccine protects against human papilloma virus (HPV), which causes 70% of all cervical cancers. This vaccine needs to be given early to girls at about age eleven—three doses are required. Currently it is expensive, but isn't it worth whatever it costs to protect a beloved daughter from cancer?

The third new vaccine has recently been approved for the prevention of shingles. Those of you who have suffered with this problem should be shouting HURRAH! This vaccine is a stronger version of the chickenpox vaccine (they are both caused by the same virus) and recommended for folks over age sixty.

And finally, most of us “of a certain age” are no longer protected by vaccines we had when we were children. For example, in 2004 there were over 7000 cases of whooping cough (pertussis) in the adult population. The recommendation now is that adults receive a “booster shot” called “Tdap” which protects against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis. I've done it. Check with your physician about this. Let's keep healthy!