

Here's what doctors know about immunizations right now: You still need them

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There's no vaccine for COVID-19 yet. But there are routine immunizations that people aren't getting for a host of debilitating and potentially deadly diseases.

In May, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported sharp drop-offs beginning in mid-March for pediatric vaccines ordered and given. And the World Health Organization estimated up to 80 million babies globally were missing recommended vaccinations due to disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the problem isn't just related to kids' vaccines. Essential adult immunizations are also being neglected.

Doctors say: Call us. We can help you figure it out.

Childhood vaccination recommendations, which target a host of diseases including polio, measles, mumps and rubella, never changed during the pandemic, said pediatrician Dr. Sally Goza, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics. But behavior did.

"People were told to stay home. They've been scared to go to doctor's offices," she said. Fewer office visits have meant fewer vaccinations.

But despite the pandemic, it's crucial to stick to the schedule the CDC has devised for childhood vaccinations, Goza said. "There's a reason for that schedule. It's well thought out so children have protection as soon as they can, and it's spaced out to be safe and effective."

An outbreak of a disease like measles that can be prevented by vaccination is a horrifying thought, she said. "COVID is here for a while. If we (also) put ourselves at risk of a vaccine-preventable outbreak, we've increased our risk of children dying or being ill."

For adults, the No. 1 priority for immunization is against the flu this coming season, said Dr. Ada Stewart, president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians. Pneumococcal vaccination, which protects against a common cause of severe pneumonia, also is vital in people 65 and older and others with certain underlying medical conditions. "The mortality and morbidity with that (pneumonia) is really high," Stewart said. "So it's really important those individuals are up to date on their pneumonia vaccine."

Given the fluid state of COVID-19 area by area right now, "That's where your primary care provider comes into play. We are the experts, we know what's going to be safe, we know the communities in which we work, we know our patients," said Stewart, who as a family physician treats people of all ages at her practice in Columbia, South Carolina.

"I tell patients I'm their guide. I'm their partner in their health."

As COVID-19 lockdowns have eased, pediatricians are urging parents, including through a social media campaign, to get their children caught up on care, Goza said. Besides talking about vaccines, during office visits "we look at development, growth, mental health of our children," she said.

"And we make sure families are doing well—parents have lost jobs, do they have enough food? Do we need to get them on programs to help? That's part of what we do—make sure they have what they need to take care of their children."

The prospect that a COVID-19 pandemic spike might land this fall amid flu season has doctors concerned for patients of all ages. Given that currently there is no vaccine to prevent infection with COVID-19, "the best we can do is vaccinate against the flu," Stewart said. "You really don't want to have two epidemics going on at the same time if we can

help it, because it will make the possibility of more deaths imminent."

During a normal flu season, Goza's office in Fayetteville, Georgia, typically accommodates 50 to 60 kids a day for flu vaccinations. This year it will be critical to get as many kids vaccinated for flu as early as possible, she said.

"We do truly believe we'll have another wave of COVID, and if it comes in respiratory season, when kids get other respiratory illnesses, it's going to be very hard to understand what's going on with these kids."

For fall flu shots, "we'll have to be innovative to get people in and out quickly," Goza said. Drive-through tents, perhaps, or maybe flu shots just on Saturdays.

"I think pediatricians will come up with some great ideas to get that done because this is a critical year to make sure as many patients as possible get their flu vaccine," Goza said.

"And this will be good preparation for when a coronavirus vaccine comes out and we have to have a huge undertaking to get the [vaccine](#) to children and to adults."

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