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When will America's kids get their COVID vaccines?

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Kids will be kids, and that's exactly why Holly McDade plans to get her

three young children the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it becomes available to them.

"Little kids can't help but touch their mouths and their noses and touch other things," said McDade, 32, of Strasburg, Va. "They just don't think about it. It's not where their brains are at yet."

McDade isn't concerned so much about her kids getting sick, but to whom they might spread COVID-19. Her immediate family has a range of health problems that increase their risk of severe illness—a husband with asthma, a father-in-law with multiple sclerosis, and both grandmothers with rheumatoid arthritis—not to mention the chance of infecting a random stranger.

"You don't have to love somebody to not want them to get sick," McDade noted.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 vaccines for kids are still some months away, possibly more than a year for the youngest children, experts say.

Pfizer announced this week that its vaccine is safe and remarkably effective in children aged 12 to 15, with no vaccinated kids falling ill with COVID-19 out of 2,300 kids total in the study, said Dr. Tina Tan. She is a professor of pediatrics with the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, in Chicago.

"You're looking there at a vaccine efficacy of around 100%," Tan said. "Now, take it with a grain of salt because it's still early and it's a small trial, but I think it's very, very, very encouraging."

Based on those numbers, Tan expects Pfizer to seek to expand its vaccine's emergency authorization to teenagers.

Younger kids will have to wait longer for COVID vaccines

"If that is successful, by the fall of 2021 when school starts we may be vaccinating kids between 12 and 18 years of age," Tan said.

However, vaccine trials for kids younger than 12 have only just started, and results from those trials aren't likely to become available until the end of this year or early next, according to health experts.

Based on that, there won't be a vaccine available for McDade's kids—girls 3 and 6, and a 1-year-old boy—until sometime next year.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has said that elementary school kids likely won't be vaccinated until the first quarter of 2022.

Which raises the natural question: Won't all this be over by then?

Probably not, experts say, because kids will need to be vaccinated to reach the 75% to 85% of population protected to produce herd immunity.

"We need to remember that children make up close to a quarter of all the population in the U.S.," said Dr. Henry Bernstein, an infectious disease expert and professor of pediatrics at Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell in New Hyde Park, N.Y. "By vaccinating children, we're protecting the children, but if they're less likely to get the disease, they're less likely to spread the disease to others, and that's a good thing as well."

In fact, Tan noted, a lot of kids will need to be vaccinated to make up for the one in three adults who currently say they will not get the COVID-19 vaccine at this time.

And while COVID-19 isn't as likely to cause severe disease in kids, they still can get very sick from it, health experts warn.

Overcoming parents' vaccine hesitancy is critical

Nearly 270 children have died from COVID-19 during this pandemic year, Bernstein noted, more than double the average 110 kids who die from flu annually.

Kids infected with COVID-19 also are at risk of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), a condition that can lead to hospitalization in an intensive care unit and time spent on a mechanical ventilator, Tan said.

Despite this, doctors expect they'll have to work hard to sell some parents on the value of vaccinating their kids.

"It appears we may have a difficult time selling it to adults for themselves," Bernstein said. "If we're having difficulty selling it to adults, you can only imagine that we're going to have difficulty selling it to parents of kids."

More than one-quarter of U.S. parents currently do not intend to vaccinate their kids against COVID-19, according to a new study from Indiana University.

"I do believe parents will be receptive to the vaccines for children once they have their questions answered and they understand the process that's been done to develop and thoroughly study these vaccines," Bernstein added.

The return to in-person school for many kids might help this process. Many children have fallen behind on their routine immunizations during

the pandemic, Tan said, and some schools might add the COVID-19 vaccine to the standard list of shots that a kid needs to attend class.

"Now that kids are going back to school, schools need to be very vigilant about making sure that the kids who are going back are up to date on their immunizations," Tan said.

McDade said that she needs no sales job on the vaccine for her kids, although she understands the hesitancy of others.

"Vaccines are something we're used to taking a long time to develop, but as our knowledge base grows and technology grows I think it's something that can develop more quickly," McDade said.

"Just because up to now it's taken a while for vaccines to be developed, we in our heads think if it happens too fast then it can't be right, it can't be good. I have to trust that the physicians and medical providers and scientists know more about this than I do," McDade continued.

"I am not a science person. At some point, you have to extend your trust to somebody who is a science person who knows more than you do," she said.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on MIS-C.

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