

Take stress out of back-to-school immunizations

By Brenda Koch

Summer is half over. As you begin thinking about school supplies, haircuts and back-to-school shopping don't forget about immunizations. If you have a child beginning kindergarten or entering middle school, chances are they are due for an immunization.

Immunizations are a long-proven safeguard against the spread of disease – not only to your child but to those around them that may not be able to be immunized. The potential for the spread of disease is higher whenever we find ourselves in larger group settings, so it is important for us to do our best to prevent outbreaks.

Parents sometimes ask why boosters are necessary if vaccines work so well. Booster doses help maintain immunity once your protection begins to wane. Non-live vaccines require three or more doses to achieve maximum immunity. Protection from non-live vaccines fades over time, but they are safer for people with weak immune systems. Live vaccines provide better protection and require fewer doses. However, they may cause a life-threatening infection in someone with a weakened immune system. Some viruses mutate, like the influenza virus, and must be updated periodically to provide the best protection.

Kindergarten & 6th grade

Parents also ask me how many shots their child will need. Fortunately, most kids are current on immunizations and will only need two combination vaccines to start kindergarten. These vaccines are given between the ages of 4-6 and consist of the Dtap/polio and the MMR/varicella vaccines.

Middle schoolers will be due to receive the Tdap, HPV and meningitis vaccines. Most vaccines take a couple of weeks to provide protection, so it is important to vaccinate before classes begin.

Schools work to notify parents when vaccines are due. If you are not sure what your child needs, reach out to your child's healthcare provider.

You do not want to be the parent who receives the phone call from your child on the first day of school saying that they are not able to attend for lack of immunizations.

August is a pediatrician's busiest time of the year so make sure you are planning accordingly. Schedule appointments sooner rather than later.

Help with vaccine costs

Thanks to the federally funded Vaccines for Children, most healthcare providers can offer low-cost or no-cost vaccines to children who lack insurance coverage for vaccines. This program covers children from birth through age 18 and all routinely recommended vaccines.

Calming tips

If your kindergartner or your sixth-grader is stressing out about getting a shot, try to calm the child by being honest and calm yourself. Consider these tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- Take time to explain that your child may feel a little pinch and it will go away very fast. Use words like “pressure” or “poke” rather than “pain” or “shot.”
- Remain upbeat and relaxed before, during, and especially after shots.
- You can take deep breaths with your student to help “blow out” the pain. Have them imagine the pain is leaving their mouth as they breathe out.
- Tell a story or point out interesting things in the room to create distractions.

Brenda Koch manages the RiverStone Health Immunization Program. Child immunizations are available at RiverStone Health by appointment by calling 406-247-3382.