

How and Why Immunizations Can Prevent Serious Illnesses

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Most workers should consider being inoculated for protection against many fatal diseases for which vaccines have been developed.

anthrax, pneumonia, cholera, typhoid fever, mumps, measles, chicken pox, yellow fever, polio, whooping cough, tuberculosis, and hepatitis.

THE POSSIBLE USE BY terrorists of smallpox, a highly contagious virus that is fatal to 30% of those who contract it, has focused public attention on the need to be inoculated against it and other potentially lethal infections.

Smallpox vaccinations were abandoned in the U.S. in 1972 because the disease was deemed to have been eradicated and there was no need to risk the potential life-threatening complications that typically affect some fifteen of every one million persons vaccinated for the first time.

But under the threat of bioterrorism, the government is now embarking on a program to immunize a million health care workers and military personnel against smallpox, and in 2004 plans to offer vaccinations free to the 150 million Americans who have never had a smallpox shot. Those who have been previously vaccinated against smallpox also will need to be revaccinated if they want to be fully protected.

Whether or not to risk the serious side-effects that can accompany a voluntary smallpox shot is a decision everyone will soon face.

However, aside from smallpox, most Americans would be well advised to consider being inoculated for protection against many of the 20 other sometimes fatal diseases for which vaccines have been developed. These include influenza, plague, diphtheria, tetanus,

By offering employees immunization against these preventable illnesses, employers can not only reduce on-the-job absences and the need for expensive therapies and hospitalization, but also will help decrease the spread of communicable illnesses in their workplace as well as in the community.

One of the most serious illnesses that can be avoided by shots is influenza, a lung infection that kills 20,000 to 40,000 Americans annually and hospitalizes over 100,000 who contract it. While most vaccines provide lifetime or long-term protection, influenza is a constantly mutating virus that must be treated with a vaccine that is annually tailored to its changing characteristics.

Another illness preventable with shots is pneumococcal pneumonia, a lung infection that annually afflicts up to two million persons and kills up to 70,000 of them. It is the sixth most common cause of death overall. Although a pneumonia vaccine has been available since 1983, its availability has not been widely broadcast by the medical profession, and most shots are currently given only "on request" to those who have heard about them through the grapevine. They generally cost only \$20.

A pneumonia shot protects 70% to 90% of those who receive it from serious infection for life, although a booster shot is usually recommended for high-risk patients, such as heavy drinkers and smokers, every ➤

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6-10 years. Although pneumonia tends to strike in late summer and early fall, the shot can be given at any time of the year.

Another highly contagious disease considered a possible bioterrorist weapon is anthrax, which can live in the soil and animal products for decades. A number of post offices and other locations were found to be contaminated in 2002; the anthrax spores were apparently spread through the mails. The infection usually enters the body through skin contact, but it also can enter through the lungs. Pulmonary anthrax is almost always fatal, even with early treatment.

A vaccine that all factory workers should receive every 10 years is one that prevents tetanus, a very severe illness also known as lockjaw. The tetanus germ flourishes only in deep puncture wounds that cannot be reached by air. The vaccine is not effective in preventing infection in surface scrapes and abrasions. Tetanus vaccine often is administered in conjunction with immunization for diphtheria.

Immunization against measles, mumps, rubella, and chickenpox (varicella) is usually done in childhood, but it is estimated that possibly as many as 10% of all adults have not been vaccinated for these so-called childhood diseases because their parents opposed their vaccination for religious or “philosophical” reasons. The American Medical Association recommends that adults who have not had one or more of these inoculations should schedule an appointment with a physician to get them. According to the Centers for Disease Control, adults can get as many as five different inoculations at one time without experiencing the risk of side effects.

The most common preventable disease among travelers is hepatitis A. Those who will be traveling in countries where the disease is common should get the first dose at least four weeks before departure and a second dose six to 12 months later. Two doses are needed to ensure long-term protection. Hepatitis B, usually transmitted through blood and other bodily fluids, can be contracted by emergency responders and health care personnel. Three doses are needed.



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