

Adult Immunizations Save Lives

By Kevin Thurm, Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Closing the Gap, Adult Immunizations Save Lives • November 1998

I am delighted that the Office of Minority Health has chosen to focus this issue on adult immunization, and appreciate the opportunity to share with you the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) message about the critical importance of protecting adults as well as children against vaccine-preventable diseases.

As health workers, educators, and community leaders, you play a vital role in adult immunization, whether you are providing routine care for a patient, treating individuals who are at high risk of vaccine-preventable diseases such as influenza (flu) or pneumonia, or educating your neighbors or your community about important health issues. I invite you to join us and our partners in our coordinated efforts to prevent illness and to save the lives of as many as 50,000 to 70,000 adults each year in the United States who die from vaccine-preventable diseases or their complications.

We've made great strides in protecting children against such deadly infectious diseases as polio. Because of the efforts of individuals like you, childhood immunization rates are at an all-time high and infant mortality is at an all-time low.

But tragically, adults, particularly seniors and racial and ethnic minorities, are not enjoying the same protection against vaccine-preventable diseases as our children. In fact, each year in the U.S. alone, at least 45,000 adults die of complications of influenza, pneumonia, or hepatitis B despite the availability of safe and effective vaccines to prevent these illnesses. And about 90 percent of the deaths from flu-related illnesses occur in people aged 65 and above.

The Clinton Administration has fought to reach the same level of success getting adults immunized as we have in ensuring our children's safety from disease and sickness. Medicare coverage of flu shots for seniors began in 1993, providing a boost to adult immunization rates. In 1997, 65 percent of the nation's elderly—nearly all of them Medicare beneficiaries—received their annual flu shots, a 15 percent jump from 1993. Medicare also covers pneumococcal shots.

Nevertheless, we still have a long way to go. Adults remain 100 times more likely than children to die each year from vaccine-preventable diseases. People with diabetes are about three times more likely to

die from flu and pneumonia than those without diabetes, yet more than half of those with diabetes did not get a flu shot in 1995. In addition, African-Americans and other minorities continue to fall short of the immunization levels of the general population.

That's why last year we began implementing a comprehensive Adult Immunization Action Plan—a blueprint for future action by HHS and our partners. To reach our goals, we are working with our partners to determine which immunization strategies work best and why, and to share that information as broadly as possible. We are continuing to build on sound, scientific research at all levels. We are finding new ways to effectively deliver vaccines to adults, not only in the hospital, clinic, or nursing home, but also in non-traditional sites like pharmacies and churches. And we are getting the message to doctors and health care professionals, to families and communities, that vaccination is not just the smart thing to do, it's the right thing to do.

Meanwhile, we are strengthening our efforts to overcome the disproportionate burden of vaccine-preventable diseases in racial and ethnic communities. The HHS Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health, announced earlier this year by President Clinton and HHS Secretary Donna E. Shalala, and led by Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher, plans to eliminate health disparities in six critical areas, including adult immunizations, by the year 2010.

With the flu season now upon us, there is no better time for you to be involved. Take every opportunity to remind seniors that flu and pneumococcal shots are important and are covered by Medicare. Encourage others at high risk to get vaccinated, including individuals with diabetes. Join or form a coalition in your community to spread the word about adult immunization.

To accomplish this, we need your commitment, leadership, and energy. I hope this issue will provide you with a better understanding of adult immunization and more determination than ever to work together to ensure that adults receive the lifesaving vaccines they need. ❖

