



For Your Health: COVID-19 Vaccination Benefits Children, Families

by Dr. Graham A. Colditz
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ALTON - It may be hard to believe that, after almost two years, COVID-19 is still a major issue in the U.S. and the world over. It continues to affect our health and health care and to disrupt our daily lives. And the emergence of new variants, like omicron, can add even more uncertainty about when we'll be able to return to more normal routines.

Yet, it's important to remember that we've made a lot of progress over the past two years, even if it may not always feel that way. And earlier this fall, we passed another key milestone in our efforts to combat the coronavirus.

Children as young as 5 years old can now get a COVID-19 vaccine. And that is fantastic news.

"Vaccination is one of the best tools we have for keeping kids and families safe and healthy," said Dr. Rachel Orscheln, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

About 7 million children in the U.S. have tested positive for the novel coronavirus since the pandemic began, and even though serious cases are rare, they do happen. More than 8,000 children ages 5 to 11 in the U.S. have been hospitalized with COVID-19, and some children have died.

On top of reducing the chances that kids will get infected and become ill, vaccination helps prevent the spread of this infection to family members and caregivers, some of whom may be vulnerable to serious disease, Orscheln said.

Vaccination also helps keep kids in the classroom, by cutting down on infections in fellow students, teachers, staff members and others.

The vaccine prevents more than 90% of COVID-19 cases in children ages 5 and up. And as with vaccines for older teens and adults, the most common side effects are usually mild, including arm pain from the injection, fatigue, headache, chills and fever. These happen more often after the second shot and generally last just a day or two.

Some rare, more serious side effects are possible, and the safety of the vaccine in children continues to be monitored. But the current evidence shows it is overall safe and effective.

And not vaccinating children also has risks by increasing their chances of getting infected and becoming ill – something parents should consider when weighing decisions about vaccination, Orscheln continued: "By any measure available, the risk of developing infection with the novel coronavirus substantially outweighs any risk that may be associated with vaccination."

Pediatricians, primary care doctors and other trusted health-care providers are great resources for parents looking to get more information about the COVID-19 vaccine for children. And children can get vaccinated in many different locations, from doctor's offices to pharmacies to county health departments.

By mid-November in the U.S., about 10% of 5- to 11-year-olds received a first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. As the number of vaccinated children increases, adding to the overall vaccination tally, we increase our chances of further limiting the spread of the virus. And that can be particularly important this time of year, as we gather with family and friends for the holidays and generally take part in more indoor activities where the risk of infection is higher.

Many children want to do their part to stop the spread of the coronavirus, protecting their families and getting back to more normal school and activity schedules, Orscheln concluded. “Vaccination is a critical strategy for accomplishing these important goals,” she said.

And those would be welcome gifts as we head into winter and a new year.

It’s your health – and your family’s health. Take control.

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