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Pediatricians: Make physicals, immunizations back-to-school priorities

By Peg Quann

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Visit a pediatrician's office in the summer and you may hear more rustling of school forms than coughing or sneezing.

Summer is the high season for kids getting their physicals and vaccinations before going back to school.

This year, with outbreaks of measles reported recently in Lakewood, Ocean County, and Southeastern Pennsylvania, pediatricians are urging parents to comply with state laws and make sure their children receive their proper immunizations.



New Jersey requires that children get a physical before entering school or playing sports and that they be up-to-date with their shots.

The only acceptable reasons for parents not having their child immunized are "medical and religious exemptions," said Dr. Tina Tam, acting state commissioner of health.

But Dr. Lawrence Ahr, a pediatrician with the CHOP Care Network in Mount Laurel, said parents use those reasons as a way to get around the shots because of the controversy over vaccinations and the development of autism.

Ahr said it's only because autism first manifests itself around the time that a toddler receives his or her first measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine that the disorder was incorrectly linked to the vaccine through a faulty study in Europe.

"You can't connect the two," he said. "Children should be immunized. When you don't, that's your choice, (but) you're giving people who don't have a choice a problem."

Newborns can die from whooping cough caught from an older child or adult who isn't immunized, and the older person may be sickened for weeks, Ahr said.

Mumps can lead to sterility, and measles can cause death. In the Congo recently, 120,000 people caught measles and 1,200 died, Ahr said. Because of more worldwide travel, these diseases can spread here if people are not vaccinated.

“We all have a social responsibility to cover each other,” Ahr said.

Dr. Benjamin Rosenblum, a pediatrician at Advocare Atrium Pediatrics in Evesham, concurred.

“Vaccines are a victim of their own success,” Rosenblum said. “They have significantly reduced the frequency of illnesses. Young parents ... are forgetting illnesses their parents and grandparents lived in fear of. ... The scientific evidence is very clear that vaccines are very safe.”

Both doctors urged parents to get their children annual physicals so that any potential problems with growth or development can be discovered and corrected early.

Students are required to get physical examinations to participate in school-sponsored interscholastic or intramural team or squad sports within a year of applying for a team, using a scholastic athletic preparticipation physical examination form, according to the New Jersey Department of Education.

The physical report should include information about injuries, illnesses, medications and allergies, as well as the result of a physical examination. If the exam takes place more than 60 days before a first team practice, a health-update history is required.

State law also requires a child to get a physical before entering school, and parents are urged to get updated exams as their children grow.

If a child is transferring from one school to another, the school district should forward his or her medical files. Children transferring to a district from out of state or out of the country have 30 days to provide this information.

Karen Deterding of Lindenwold brought her son, Frederick, 7, for his annual checkup recently to the Advocare office. Her district requires it as well as an annual dental checkup, Deterding said, and she “absolutely” agrees with the need for one.

“Annual visits take care of Freddie,” she said, as her boy squirmed on the exam table.

“As a pediatrician, it’s my belief that the child should be seen on a yearly basis. ... You bring your car in every year for inspection. Some parents take better care of their car than their child,” Ahr said.

At the CHOP office, Amanda Ralff, 14, of Delran, had a physical in July for playing field hockey. Her mother, Leslie, said she too thought annual checkups were important.

“If you don’t have the physical, you don’t know if something is wrong. Kids typically don’t complain,” she said, praising the practice of urging parents to bring their children every year.

“They’re proactive instead of reactive,” Ralff said of the CHOP office. “I think this is a wonderful practice.”

During the visit, Amanda received a Gardasil vaccine against the human papillomavirus, which can lead to cervical cancer. Doctors are urging the vaccine, a series of three shots, for girls and boys after age 11.

Most vaccines are given in early childhood starting at 2 months old.

There are new requirements. Children entering day care, preschool or prekindergarten are required to get a pneumococcal vaccine as well as an annual flu shot. Children entering sixth grade must receive a meningitis vaccine as well as a booster of the tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis (Tdap) vaccine, if they haven't had a DTaP or DTP vaccine within five years, the state Department of Health states.

Some colleges also require a booster of the meningitis vaccine for students living on campus, where outbreaks of the sudden, deadly bacterial infection can occur because of the large number of people living together in dorms.

Parents have a variety of ways to obtain the needed vaccines. Most should contact their child's pediatrician or physician, or their county health office if they have financial difficulties.

Vaccines for Children is a federally funded program that provides free vaccines for children whose parents meet income requirements, Tam said.

In Burlington County, four immunization clinics are held every year. About 70 students, ages 4 to 18, attend each clinic. The next will be Sept. 26 from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Immunizations normally are given at the county Health Department in Westampton, but since its heating and air-conditioning system is being upgraded, the clinic will be held temporarily at the Virtua Community Health Center on Route 38 in Lumberton.

"Even though this one is after the start of school, it will not affect students' admittance as long as they have appointments to attend the clinics and receive the shots," said Ralph Shrom, spokesman for the Burlington County Board of Freeholders.

The clinics are offered to low-income families that cannot afford the shots or do not have health care coverage.

"Individuals interested in the clinic should contact the county Health Department or the school nurse to determine their eligibility. Children must have a referral from their school nurse," Shrom said.