

## Ask a Nurse with Isabel Clark

Call 943-LINK (5465) Mandarin Health Link 943-1554 Cantonese Health Link 943-1556



# Don't hesitate; vaccinate

## Regular shots help adults avoid potentially fatal diseases

**Q.** I visited my family doctor yesterday and she asked if my tetanus vaccination was up-to-date. It has been years since I had any vaccinations, so I had trouble answering her question. I make sure my children get all their vaccinations on time, but I've never thought about my own. Do I need regular vaccinations as well?

**A.** The need for vaccination does not end when you become an adult. There are very few things that prevent disease as easily as vaccines do. Although the tetanus-diphtheria (Td) vaccine is the vaccination we seem to think about most often, there are several other vaccines that we may need during our adult lives as well.

**Q.** What vaccines do I need as an adult?

**A.** The vaccines you require will depend on your current state of health, age, occupation and where you travel, but there are routine vaccines that everyone should have. You should be immunized against tetanus and diphtheria at least once every 10 years. If you are injured and have a wound, you may need a dose sooner. Your doctor or public health nurse can advise when an extra shot is required following a wound. If you were born in 1970 or later and have never been vaccinated, you may not be immune to measles, so you should also have one dose of the combined vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR). People born before 1970 are usually immune to measles, so most don't need to have a measles-containing vaccine. The other disease to be concerned about is chicken pox, which can be very serious in adults and adolescents. If you have never had chicken pox, you will first need to have a blood test to see if you are already protected

(immune) – many people are immune even though they don't recall being ill with chicken pox. If the blood test is negative, you will need to have the varicella (chicken pox) vaccine (two doses) so you are protected. In summary then, the basic vaccines you should have as an adult are tetanus-diphtheria (Td) once every 10 years, plus measles (MMR) and varicella vaccines once if you are not already immune. Contact your Community Health Centre or public health office to arrange for these vaccinations.

**Q.** My mom is 67 and gets an influenza vaccine every year. I think she has also had a vaccination for pneumonia. Do I need to have those vaccinations too?

**A.** Everyone who wants to prevent influenza or its complications should receive the influenza vaccine. People who are 65 years or older, like your mother, or who have chronic diseases such as heart disease, lung disease or diabetes are at high risk for serious illness or even death if they get influenza disease, and it is critical that they be vaccinated. In addition, everyone who lives with your mother should also be vaccinated. Influenza vaccine for persons at high risk of severe disease and for those who live with them is free during influenza season (October to March) through public health offices or your doctor. Like influenza vaccine, pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine is given to people who fall into specific risk categories. Most people only need this vaccine once during their lives. Your doctor or local public health nurse can tell you if you need it.

**Q.** Are there vaccines that I need for work as well?

**A.** That depends on what kind of occupation you are in. If you work in health care, there

are vaccinations you should have to protect both yourself and the people you care for. You should be immunized for influenza, hepatitis B, varicella (chicken pox) and also receive a second dose of MMR vaccine. People who work in health care-related laboratories will also need additional vaccines. Your workplace should know what vaccines you require and how you can obtain them.

**Q.** My family and I are planning a trip to India next year. Are there vaccines we should have before we travel?

**A.** There are definitely vaccines that you will need before you go, even if you were born and grew up in a country other than Canada. In addition to the routine vaccines all people should get, there are many vaccine-preventable diseases that are more common in foreign countries, and you do not want to be sick during or after your trip. The vaccines you will need are specific to what area you are travelling to. Some of the vaccines require more than one dose to be given over a period of time, so it is very important to contact a travel clinic right away to get started. Travel clinics can also advise how to prevent other diseases for which there are no vaccines, such as malaria.

**Q.** Are vaccinations safe?

**A.** Yes. The disease that you are immunized against is far worse than the vaccine reaction. You may have a very minor reaction to a vaccine that includes some swelling or tenderness at the spot where you get the needle, or a mild fever that could last a few days. Most of us have never seen the effects of these terrible diseases so it is easy to forget how serious they are. If we do not continue to immunize against the diseases, they will come back with devastating effects.

*Isabel Clark is a telehealth nurse with Calgary Health Link.*

### FYI

For more information on vaccinations, please visit:

Calgary Health Region  
[www.calgaryhealthregion.ca](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca)  
 National Advisory Committee on Immunization  
[www.naci.gc.ca](http://www.naci.gc.ca)  
 Alberta Health  
[www.health.gov.ab.ca](http://www.health.gov.ab.ca)

If you would like to speak to a health professional, you can contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling Calgary Health Link.

Calgary: (403) 943-LINK (5465)  
 Or toll free: 1-866-408-LINK (5465)