

What Vaccines Do Adults Need?

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There has been a lot of talk this year about the measles. The majority of cases in the current outbreak have occurred in unvaccinated children and young people. Although the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine is considered a childhood immunization, adults should discuss with their provider whether immunization is needed. For Veterans born in the U.S. before 1957, immunity is assumed because of the high prevalence of measles in that era.

Veterans who entered the service after 1998 are likely to have received two doses of MMR. Veterans who are not sure of their immunization history can be assessed for immunity with lab testing. In particular, women of childbearing age need to assure they are immune to prevent congenital infection with these diseases.

Several new vaccines are now in use to protect older adults and those with underlying conditions like diabetes, chronic lung disease, or compromised immunity. To guard against the flu, get the vaccine each year because flu virus can change from one year to the next. A high-dose flu vaccine is available for those over 65 to give better protection. Older Veterans and those with certain medical conditions are most susceptible to pneumonia. Two different pneumonia vaccines are now recommended for persons over 65 and younger patients with compromised immune systems: a conjugate pneumococcal vaccine plus a polysaccharide vaccine. These two vaccines are given in a set sequence and booster recommendations may differ for each patient -ask your provider!

For Veterans with diabetes, immunization for Hepatitis B is recommended as soon as diabetes is diagnosed. Persons with diabetes may be at risk for Hepatitis B in later life if lapses occur in infection control in dialysis or communal living settings. A vaccine for Hepatitis A is recommended for those who travel to other countries or live in a U.S. community with high rates of Hepatitis A; or who have chronic liver disease such as Hepatitis C, engage in male-to-male sex, or inject drugs. Hepatitis B vaccine is also recommended for patients with Hepatitis C, other forms of chronic liver disease, multiple sexual partners or injection drug use. Veterans born in the U.S. before 1987 are likely to be immune to chickenpox (varicella). Younger adults may not be immune. Vaccination against chickenpox (varicella) is necessary for those who have not had this disease and have not been vaccinated. Veterans who are not sure of their chickenpox immunity can be checked for immunity with a blood test. Adults are at a far greater risk of complications of chickenpox. Shingles (herpes zoster) is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox, which reactivates along a nerve, causing rash and pain. People who are over the age of 60 may receive a single dose of the shingles vaccine. This vaccine can reduce the risk of shingles and associated pain by 60%. Consult with your physician first.

Booster doses of tetanus-diphtheria (Td) are needed at 10-year intervals. In place of the Td booster, people age 19-64 and those 65 and older who are in contact with infants should get a one-time dose of tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis (Tdap) to also protect against whooping cough. Finally, keep in mind that many Veterans and other Americans travel abroad and are likely exposed to diseases common in those countries. If you have questions about which vaccines you need, please talk to your VA health care provider.

SOURCE: New Mexico VA Health Care System News Release

at http://www.albuquerque.va.gov/ALBUQUERQUE/features/What_Vaccines_Do_Adults_Need.asp