

Lifesaving Vaccines Under-Used by Minority Adults

By Steve Sepe, MPH

Closing the Gap, Adult Immunizations Save Lives • November 1998

Despite the staggering morbidity and mortality and associated costs of influenza, pneumococcal disease, hepatitis B infection, and other vaccine-preventable diseases of adults, the vaccines available to prevent these diseases are underused.

The use of influenza vaccine has been improving over the last decade, and coverage levels in adults have increased overall. However, certain racial and ethnic minority groups are missing the lifesaving benefits of these vaccines because they receive them at disproportionately lower rates than other groups.

Influenza and pneumococcal vaccines save lives

Approximately 90 percent of U.S. deaths associated with influenza and pneumococcal disease occur among adults aged 65 years and older. Consequently, the vaccines for these diseases are especially important for elders.

In 1995, the death rates for pneumonia and influenza among Whites was 12.4 per 100,000 population. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and Hispanics fared better, with rates at 10.8 and 9.9, respectively. But for African Americans the rate was much higher, at 17.8. Among Native Americans and Alaskan Natives, the rate was 14.2.

Hepatitis B vaccine spares suffering

Hepatitis B infection is possible at any age, from birth well into the elder years. The infection spreads easily, especially if a family or household member is infected.

Chronic infection leads to liver failure, cirrhosis, and liver cancer. As discussed on page 10 of issue, hepatitis B infection rates are devastatingly high among first-generation Asian Americans and their offspring, and among Pacific Islanders. A simple series of three injections with hepatitis B vaccine can spare enormous suffering and save lives.

Vaccination rates are lower among certain groups

The most recent data from the 1995 National Health Interview Survey and 1997 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, show the disparities between racial and ethnic groups. These data document the highest coverage levels recorded for influenza and pneumococcal vaccines among people age 65 and older, but clearly indicate a need to focus activities on racial/ethnic minorities.

While it is unclear why vaccination rates vary among racial and ethnic groups, we know it is probably not an access to care issue. Even though minorities go to see their physicians at around the same rates as Whites, their vaccination rates are significantly lower. Currently, the national Adult Immunization Action Plan is calling for specific studies to look at reasons for these trends.



People Aged 65+ Who Reported Receiving Vaccines, by Race/Ethnicity

Influenza Vaccine

White, non Hispanic.....	67%
Black, non-Hispanic.....	50%
Hispanic.....	58%

Pneumococcal Vaccine

White, non-Hispanic.....	47%
Black, non-Hispanic.....	30%
Hispanic.....	34%

Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, CDC, 1997.

What your organization can do

The Adult Immunization Action Plan—formulated after more than a year of cooperative effort among HHS agencies—specifies that to decrease racial and ethnic health disparities, we must use the best available science to develop high quality health care at a reasonable cost. And we must ensure that the care purchased protects and improves beneficiary health and satisfaction.

In general, agencies and community groups should:

- increase the demand for adult vaccination by improving provider and public awareness;
- increase the capacity of health care delivery system to effectively deliver vaccines to adults;
- expand financing mechanisms to support the increased delivery of vaccines to adults; and
- monitor and improve the performance of the nation's immunization program.

Specific action steps to achieve these objectives are contained with the Adult Immunization Action Plan. Groups working to increase access to better health care among minorities should consider the Adult Immunization Action Plan as a core document for their efforts.

The complete document can be viewed on the National Vaccine Program Office's Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/od/nvpo>. For further information, call the NVPO at 404-639-4450.

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