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Back-to-school immunization vital to the community

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Last winter's outbreak of measles linked to Disneyland is a perfect example of why childhood vaccinations are strongly encouraged as a new school year begins, according to Cindy Wilson, MS, RN, PHN, IBCLC, director of public health nursing for Nevada County.

This is especially true since according to 2014-15 data from the California Department of Public Health, the percentage of local children entering kindergarten who are current with their vaccinations is as low as 71 percent at one public elementary school (and only 30 percent at one charter school), compared with a statewide average of just over 90 percent.

"Immunizations help protect both the individual child, as well as other members of the community from diseases," she said. "With our low immunization rates, Nevada County is very susceptible to highly contagious diseases, such as measles. If we experience such an outbreak, children will be sick, public health resources will be very strained, and schools will have high rates of pupils unable to attend classes."

Dr. Ken Cutler, the county's public health officer, reinforced Wilson's remarks about the importance of vaccinations. The concept is known as community immunity, he explained.

"When most members of the community are protected against a contagious disease, the opportunity for an outbreak is substantially reduced," Cutler said.

In collaboration with Rotary Club of Grass Valley and Nevada County Superintendent of Schools, Western Sierra Medical Clinic is holding a Healthy Community Day including free immunizations for families with no insurance, or with high co-pays or deductibles from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 8.

The Nevada County Public Health Department has scheduled a special back to school immunization clinic from 1 to 4 p.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 18, behind the Grass Valley Veteran's Hall for youth 18 or younger who have no health insurance, are eligible for Medi-Cal, or whose insurance doesn't cover vaccines, or who are Native American or Alaskan Native.

Parents are asked to bring their children's immunization records to both events.

Public Health also offers immunizations through its Vaccines for Children program from 1-4 p.m. the second and fourth Thursdays of each month (Aug. 13 and 27) at the same location. They are available to children 18 and under and are free if Medi-Cal eligible. There is a \$10 per shot administration fee for uninsured or underinsured, as well as for Native American or Alaskan Native children, although Wilson said no child eligible for vaccines under this program would be turned away because they can't pay.

“For children with insurance, their primary health care provider is the best resource for getting their shots,” she said. “This could be their pediatrician or family doctor. The local schools do not offer shots.”

Cutler acknowledged that some parents are reluctant to have children immunized out of fear of negative side effects.

“Like any medical intervention, vaccines have risks and benefits,” he noted. “Fortunately, serious reactions such as severe allergic reactions are unusual with vaccinations. On the other hand, the benefits have been remarkable. Smallpox has been eradicated, after killing hundreds of millions of people. We haven't had polio transmission in the U.S. for decades, and it used to paralyze thousands of Americans each year. Measles was eliminated from the U.S. in 2000; many young pediatricians have never even seen it. Unfortunately measles is still quite widespread in the world and repeatedly gets re-imported, so we have to be vigilant.”

Wilson pointed to an article in Forbes magazine that listed diphtheria, polio, rubella and congenital rubella, smallpox, and tetanus as having been completely or nearly eliminated in the U.S. The same article shows striking decreases in the number of cases of influenza, pertussis, hepatitis A and B, measles and mumps. (She observed that Nevada County saw a pertussis outbreak in 2013 that involved 72 cases.)

“Vaccines are not perfect,” Cutler said. “It would be unrealistic to think they were. But we should acknowledge the incredible reductions in disease we've had because of them. Just like physical activity, good nutrition, and not using tobacco, vaccinations don't ensure good health but can be a powerful contributor to preventing disease and maintaining health.”

The California Department of Public Health has produced a brochure answering parents' key questions about vaccine safety. The link is: <http://www.eziz.org/assets/docs/IMM-916.pdf>.

Parents may discover immunization levels at individual schools by visiting: <http://www.shotsforschool.org/k-12/how-doing/>.

The Centers for Disease Control provides vaccination schedules for children at every level, and for adults. Visit the CDC website for specific links.

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