

New vaccination requirements for 2009-2010 school year

Summer is here. It's not too early to prepare for next school year. In addition to the usual new notebooks and pencils, some elementary school students in Alaska will need immunizations before school starts this fall or by July 1 if they are attending child care. Children in kindergarten through sixth grade will need to show proof that they have received two varicella (chickenpox) vaccinations; that they have received the first vaccine and are in the waiting period for the second; or that they already have had the disease. Children in preschool and Head Start or those attending child care who are not yet in elementary school will continue to need only one varicella vaccination.

Varicella is a contagious disease that usually occurs in childhood. Although many people think that it is not a serious illness, varicella can lead to severe skin infections, scars, pneumonia, brain damage and death. Serious disease complications are much more likely to occur in infants less than one year of age (too young to be vaccinated) and in unvaccinated children and adults who are older than twelve. It is not possible to predict who will develop serious or even deadly complications from varicella infection. Persons who previously were completely healthy have been known to die as a result of this disease.

A single varicella vaccination is estimated to be effective for only 80 percent to 85 percent of children. This means that some persons who have received only one vaccination may remain unprotected. Approximately one-third of these vaccinated-but-unprotected children will experience moderate disease if they get chickenpox. A second varicella vaccination greatly reduces the risk of disease among these unprotected children and has been shown to be 100 percent effective against development of severe disease.

Parents or guardians should make arrangements to have their child's immunizations updates with their health care provider or local public health clinic. Public immunization clinics, including for varicella vaccinations, are being held at the following dates, times and locations:

- Walk-in clinic from 1:30 to 4 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays at the Kenai Public Health Clinic, 630 Barnacle Way #A, in Kenai. Call for more information, 907-335-3400.
- Walk-in clinic from 1:30 to 4 p.m. Thursdays at the Cottonwood Health Center, 230 E. Marydale Ave. #1, in Soldotna. Call for more information, 907-262-3119.

- Appointments available from 9 to 11 a.m. and 1 to 3:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays at the Homer Public Health Center, 195 E. Bunnell Ave., in Homer. Call for more information, 907-235-8857.
- Walk-in clinics from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Aug. 5, 18, 19 and 20, and from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Aug. 15 at the Seward Public Health Center, 201 Third Ave., in Seward. Appointments also available. Call for more information, 907-224-5567.

Parents should bring their child's immunization records to the clinics.

To ensure children are protected against this disease, beginning July 1, 2009, verification that a child has already had varicella (or any other vaccine-preventable disease) will require confirmation by an Alaska-licensed physician (MD or DO), advanced nurse practitioner (ANP), or physician's assistant (PA). These medical professionals must document this verification on an official state form that may be obtained from schools, healthcare providers, or the Alaska Immunization Program website www.epi.alaska.gov/immunize. Only the signed, official form needs to be obtained. Lab results are not required for documentation. Documentation of history of varicella disease, signed by an Alaska-licensed MD, DO, ANP, or PA and dated prior to July 1, 2009, will continue to be considered valid.

Children who have had varicella disease may still receive the vaccine. Unvaccinated children without an exemption will be excluded from attending school and school activities.

Reactions to varicella vaccination are uncommon and are usually limited to soreness and/or redness at the site of vaccination. The stronger, naturally circulating virus is more likely to re-emerge in adulthood as shingles than is the weakened virus used in the vaccine.

Also beginning July 1, 2009, school immunization regulations require that students who need a 10 year Td (tetanus/diphtheria) booster, typically at age 14 to 16, receive Tdap vaccine (tetanus/diphtheria/acellular pertussis). Outbreaks of pertussis, or whooping cough, are occurring in Alaska communities. This disease can be devastating to infants.

More information regarding the updated immunization requirements may be obtained at the Kenai Public Health Center, 907-335-3400, or by calling the Alaska Immunization Helpline 269-8088 in Anchorage or 888-430-4321 statewide.

Don't wait — vaccinate!

This column submitted by Clayton Holland, director of Pupil Services, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District.