

Transcript Details

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Addressing Pediatric Flu Burden: The Critical Role of Vaccination

Announcer:

You're listening to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. This episode is sponsored by CSL Seqirus. Here's your host, Dr. Charles Turck.

Dr. Turck:

Welcome to *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Charles Turck, and joining me to discuss the impact of the last pediatric flu season and the importance of vaccination is Dr. Ravi Jhaveri. He's the Division Head for Pediatric Infectious Diseases at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. Dr. Jhaveri, welcome to the program.

Dr. Jhaveri:

Appreciate it. I'm happy to be here.

Dr. Turck:

So, Doctor Jhaveri, according to CDC data, the 2024 to 2025 influenza season recorded 186 pediatric deaths, making it one of the deadliest flu seasons for American children in over a decade. So, what does this number suggest to us about the burden of pediatric influenza and the urgency of vaccination?

Dr. Jhaveri:

Yeah, it really reminds us that flu is sort of an ever present risk and that we continue to need to be vigilant about vaccinating all children. Flu vaccination is recommended for all kids six months and older. When you think about the numbers of kids who die of flu and flu-related complications, while some of them certainly have medical conditions—existing illnesses that put them at high risk—a lot of these kids really have no other medical conditions. They're previously healthy, they contract flu, and either have complications from the flu itself or might have a secondary bacterial infection, which is probably one of the more common causes that adults and children die from flu. And so it's really important that parents find ways to get their kids vaccinated.

Dr. Turck:

Now, with that in mind, would you walk us through how influenza's presentation varies between different children, particularly those with underlying health conditions, and how it can complicate their health?

Dr. Jhaveri:

Sure. So, certainly, when you think about patients who have existing illnesses—where there's heart disease or lung disease or the like—I think that flu tends to be fairly straightforward as far as difficulty breathing and complications like pneumonia. When we think about younger kids, the symptoms can be less obvious. It can be persistent fever, it can be upper respiratory infections, ear infections, and the like, and then spread to other complications. And when we think about the worst complications of flu, that, again, can happen in any age group. We think about severe pneumonia that is severe because of the virus itself, or because you get a bacterial infection on top of that. Flu and the inflammation can affect the brain, and so this is what we call influenza-related encephalopathy. And so these complications are out there, and we know that the evidence is there that you can get vaccinated and reduce the risk significantly. And certainly, if you get diagnosed with flu, you could potentially seek medications to help control the virus.

Dr. Turck:

Now, how can real time surveillance and strain tracking help us prepare for and respond to seasonal pediatric flu surges?

Dr. Jhaveri:

Surveillance is really important. It helps us see when the season is really starting to hit the upslope, and we encourage that as soon as

vaccine is available, that patients find a way to get vaccinated. So, typically, that ends up being in the September/October months—that's usually when we see that—and it's, hopefully, a few months before the flu season really kicks off. But sometimes, the surveillance shows us that flu season is starting early, and we have to be much more vigilant about pushing out vaccine. And some people may remember back in 2009, when we had the pandemic H1N1 flu that emerged, that happened in April, and we saw upticks in activity towards the end of what we expected to be flu season. That was a clue for us that's something new and different was happening.

Dr. Turck:

For those just joining us, this is *VacciNation* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Charles Turck, and I'm speaking with Dr. Ravi Jhaveri about the burden of pediatric influenza and strategies for addressing it.

Now, Dr. Jhaveri, let's shift gears and talk about vaccine hesitancy for a moment. With concerns about vaccines continuing to pose a barrier to flu prevention, would you speak to the safety of current influenza vaccines for children, particularly with the availability of the thimerosal-free options?

Dr. Jhaveri:

So, we've been using flu vaccines for decades, and we've had a recommendation for vaccinating all children for many, many years now. The vaccines are exceptionally safe in their profile and they're effective not only at reducing the severity of illness, but also in preventing you from getting infected. So they work in both ways. Almost all the versions of influenza vaccine actually do not have thimerosal; they haven't had it for quite some time. That is prior to any sort of alarmist language that's happened recently. And so people can feel confident that that's really not going to be an issue.

Dr. Turck:

Now, beyond safety, what are the most significant barriers affecting access to flu vaccines for kids today and what strategies have proven most effective in improving vaccination rates?

Dr. Jhaveri:

Yeah, I think there's a lot of logistics involved with getting vaccinated that can pose challenges for patients. I think the pandemic has really created strains on doctor's offices and vaccine delivery, such that we don't really see as many offices having flu vaccination days like they used to have or evening appointments. It's really become a challenge. And so the burden often falls on families to find a pharmacy, find a mobile clinic, find a school-based clinic maybe: some alternative means outside the office for them to get vaccinated. And so many physicians will still vaccinate within an appointment, so if you happen to have a annual physical or a well-child check, it's easy to get vaccine at that time. But getting vaccination outside that visit can be more challenging. And so, really, just trying to capitalize on opportunities wherever you are interacting with the medical system to try to get vaccine.

Dr. Turck:

And before we close, Dr. Jhaveri, what message would you want our listeners to take away with them into our next flu season?

Dr. Jhaveri:

Yeah, I would just impress upon everyone that flu is an ever-present illness. It's not benign in any age group and particularly in children, and so really seizing opportunities to get vaccinated at any point, at any time, whenever it's convenient, and I think not saying, "Oh yeah, I'll take care of this later." Doing it as soon as you can is really the most important thing.

Dr. Turck:

With those insights in mind, I want to thank my guest, Dr. Ravi Jhaveri, for joining me to discuss how we can reduce the severity and burden of pediatric influenza through vaccination. Dr. Jhaveri, it was great having you on the program.

Dr. Jhaveri:

Thanks for having me, appreciate it.

Announcer:

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