



The Maryland State Medical Society

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THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR IS A GOOD TIME FOR ALL AGES TO GET CAUGHT UP ON VACCINATIONS

By Gene Ransom, III

Even though more than 12 million Marylanders have received at least one COVID-19 vaccination, immunization rates for other communicable illnesses have dropped, leaving particularly vulnerable communities — such as children, college students and seniors — susceptible to a host of preventable illnesses. With Maryland students returning to classrooms this month, this is an important opportunity to ensure that all family members are protected from potentially fatal illnesses, including measles, polio, meningitis and pneumococcal disease.

Vaccines are the most effective protection against stopping the spread of a broad range of contagious illnesses. However, outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases that were once thought to be well controlled, including measles and whooping cough, are still occurring. In 2019, the U.S. saw its most severe case of measles in 25 years, including an outbreak in Maryland. In addition, since 2016, there have been more than 15,000 cases of hepatitis A in Maryland, over 8,500 hospitalizations from it and 140 deaths.

With routine vaccination rates dropping across the state, Maryland physicians worry that under-vaccination could lead to a dangerous outbreak of an easily spreadable illness. The COVID-19 pandemic led to many missed routine medical visits and wellness checks, which also led to a drop in recommended immunizations. Maryland's pre-kindergarten vaccination rates for measles, mumps and rubella have declined by 76%, which could leave children susceptible to illness as they return to school.

This month, catching up on recommended vaccines must be a priority for Maryland families and residents. In addition to back-to-school month, Gov. Larry Hogan declared August to be Immunization Awareness Month in the state, encouraging Marylanders to stay up to date on vaccines and boosters.

The Maryland Department of Health requires a full set of vaccinations prior to returning to in-person and virtual schooling for illnesses such as measles, chickenpox, rubella and hepatitis A. All parents are familiar with the “back-to-school sniffles,” when classrooms

full of kids become hot spots of the common cold, the flu and stomach viruses. The same could be true for vaccine-preventable illnesses like measles if children are not protected.

But vaccines are not just for younger children. Many colleges and universities have required vaccines that young adults must complete before returning to campus, where close contact in dorms and residence halls can facilitate the spread of illnesses like meningitis quickly. Older Marylanders should also speak with their physician to ensure they are caught up on vaccinations they need, such as vaccines that protect against pneumococcal and shingles.

Maintaining a recommended vaccine schedule is a safe, effective, and critical step for Marylanders to protect themselves and their communities against infectious diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us how important vaccines are, but Marylanders cannot let other vaccinations slip through the cracks.

All vaccinations work on a different schedule, so it is critical to have a conversation with your physician to ensure you are getting the right immunizations at the right time. Marylanders can view their official vaccination records through MyIR, Maryland's free immunization record portal, or by asking their physician to confirm the status of their most recent vaccinations.

While so many Marylanders diligently responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by getting vaccinated, our communities and health care system cannot afford an outbreak of another dangerous illness. Back-to-school season can be hectic, but parents can get ahead of the curve by checking MyIR, speaking with their primary care physicians and catching up on vaccines early. As part of Immunization Awareness Month, MedChi encourages all Marylanders to have a conversation with their physician about the most appropriate vaccine schedule for their family.

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About MedChi

MedChi, The Maryland State Medical Society is a non-profit membership association of Maryland physicians. It is the largest physician organization in Maryland. The mission of MedChi is to serve as Maryland's foremost advocate and resource for physicians, their patients and the public health of Maryland. For more information, please visit www.medchi.org.