Adult Immunization Project

How to be a Vaccine Advocate

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Suggestions for Staff in a Dialysis Facility, Transplant Center, or Kidney Care Setting

Vaccination is one of the most powerful disease prevention tools modern medicine offers. **Vaccines save lives.**[1,2] Healthcare workers have special responsibilities to protect the people under their care, themselves, and the people they work with. This goes hand-in-hand with being proactive to safeguard your own health.[3]

As you make plans for your own vaccination or re-vaccination needs, consider the following:

Protect your health

As you know, working in the patient care setting puts you at higher risk of getting vaccine-preventable diseases such as COVID-19 or influenza. You come in contact with many vulnerable individuals who are prone to infections, especially those who live in multi-generational households with children. Vaccines, especially those for influenza and COVID-19, do not provide complete 'sterilizing immunity' (meaning that you may have some symptoms if you are exposed to the virus).[4] Vaccines do reduce your risk for and protect you from serious illness. For example, when the updated bivalent COVID-19 vaccine became available in the Fall of 2022, the risk of a COVID hospitalization in older adults was reduced by half.[5] Even when vaccines are 'only' 60% effective, that still means that they reduce your risk of developing symptoms after exposure by 60%.[6]

Protect healthcare workers

As a healthcare worker in a dialysis facility, nephrology office, or transplant center, you are at risk of contracting and spreading contagious diseases.[7,8] You also see firsthand the struggle with staffing. Being vaccinated means you reduce your own risk for infection, so

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[1] "Benefits of Flu Vaccination." 2022. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. September 13, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/vaccine-benefits.htm.

[2] "5 Things You Should Know about COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC." n.d. https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/whats-new/5-things-you-should-know.html.

[3] Department of Health. Victoria, Australia. 2023. "Vaccination for Healthcare Workers." Health.Vic.Gov.Au. May 18, 2023. https://www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/vaccination-for-healthcare-workers.

[4] Hou, Chia-Yi. 2020. "The Hill." The Hill, June 8, 2020. https://thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/prevention-cures/501677-what-is-sterilizing-immunity-and-do-we-need-it/.

[5] "CDC: Bivalent Vaccine Cuts Risk of COVID Hospitalization by Half." 2022. Fierce Healthcare. December 20, 2022. https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/providers/cdc-bivalent-vaccine-cuts-risk-covid-hospitalization-half.

[6] "Flu Vaccines Work." 2022. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. October 6, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/flu/vaccines-work/index.html.

[7] Field, Robert I. "Mandatory Vaccination of Health Care Workers: Whose Rights Should Come First?" P & T: A Peer-Reviewed Journal for Formulary Management 34, no. 11 (November 2009): 615–18. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2810172/.

[8] Khunti, Kamlesh, Atiya Kamal, Manish Pareek, and Amanda Griffiths. "Should Vaccination for Healthcare Workers Be Mandatory?" Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine 114, no. 5 (May 2021): 235–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/01410768211013525.

you preserve your ability to work. By being vaccinated, you also 'stop the spread' and preserve your colleagues' ability to work.

Protect patients

First, do no harm. That's the motto we live by as healthcare workers. By being vaccinated, you protect your vulnerable patients, for whom 'a minor flu' is never minor. The death rate of patients on dialysis goes up in the winter months, in part because of influenza or other viral respiratory tract infections.[9] If a patient on dialysis ends up in the hospital, a 'downward spiral' often results in the patient becoming more debilitated or in need of a nursing home. By being vaccinated, we are doing our best to protect them.

The benefits are high; the risk for side effects is low

Yes, vaccines have side effects. The most common ones are a sore arm or muscle aches. These are temporary and reversible. Most people experience minor discomfort, if any at all, after their vaccination, with mild side effects that will go away on their own in the following days. Rare side effects are just that –rare. If you have heard about any serious side effects on the news – or through your friends or family – and want more information about them, ask your doctor or other health care team members to discuss these with you. It is important that you feel comfortable talking about your fears without feeling you will be judged, and you should feel supported with that process.

Staff who are vaccinated are role models and vaccine advocates for patients.

You are among the people that patients trust the most. For many patients receiving kidney care, dialysis is their lifeline, and you are the one providing it for them. When you tell them you are vaccinated, they become more confident about vaccination and less afraid of side effects. Vaccine confidence benefits their health and safety.

[9] Charnow, Jody A. 2019. "Dialysis Patients More Likely to Die in Winter." Renal and Urology News. January 15, 2019. https://www.renalandurologynews.com/conference-highlights/era-edta-congress/dialysis-patients-more-likely-to-die-in-winter/.

Suggestions for Engaging in a Dialysis Facility, Transplant Center, or Kidney Care Setting

Speaking with your patients about getting vaccinated is important but hard to do. Between trying to explain the risks and benefits, listening to your patients' concerns, reflecting on your own experiences, and managing the safety precautions, it is easy to feel overwhelmed with what information to prioritize. Here are a few helpful tips for managing vaccination conversations with your patients.

Get Vaccinated Yourself!

The primary concern for most patients is safety. Telling patients that you believe in the information available about vaccines and that you have received the vaccination yourself is the first step toward easing anxieties about safety concerns.

Ask for permission to speak about vaccination

Timing the conversation is a difficult task. Beginning the discussions one or two weeks prior to flu shots being available in the facility, for example, can give you and the patient time to review this important topic

Include a description of the threat of the disease and the benefit of being vaccinated

The benefits of vaccinations typically far outweigh the threats. Including both the risks posed by not vaccinating against the disease and the benefits of receiving the vaccine will allow your patient to weigh their options and make an informed decision.

Examples:

- You note that patients on dialysis are more likely to be hospitalized or die in the winter months than in the summer, likely related to influenza or influenza-like illnesses, which could be prevented by vaccination.
- Hepatitis B is a blood-borne illness. Patients on dialysis are at risk because they have such frequent access to their blood, and vaccination is nearly 100% effective.

Talk about which vaccines you have received and your experiences

Introducing your own story with the facts will help to build rapport and trust with your patients. This means to include both the common side effects such as a sore arm or muscle aches so that you can give them the complete picture and actually take the fear out of the side effect .

Discuss how being vaccinated helps others

Vaccinations prevent diseases, not only in you, but also for your family and for your surrounding community. Being vaccinated helps to protect everyone in your dialysis facility, transplant center, and kidney care office!

Respect concerns

Take the time to listen to what your patients' concerns are and validate them. Welcome any questions that may have in return and try to make the discussion more conversational.

Reference vaccinations frequently in routine conversations

Talking about vaccinations can be scary, especially when the patient already has prior feelings about them. Mentioning the importance of vaccines may help patients feel more comfortable discussing the topic. Allowing patients to reference vaccinations in casual conversation can help ease anxiety.

How to Talk about Vaccines

Once your patient has agreed to discuss vaccinations with you, they will most likely have a lot of questions. Here are some frequently asked questions that may help you navigate the path to communications between you and your patients.

Why do we need vaccines?

Your body needs protective proteins, known as antibodies, that help fight bacteria and infections to prevent illness. Vaccinations help your body create these protective antibodies without having exposure to the disease. Receiving this protection benefits not only yourself, but also your family, coworkers, and community.

Are vaccinations safe? What are the side effects?

Vaccines undergo many rounds of testing and trials before approval to ensure their effectiveness and determine the likelihood of adverse reactions. However, vaccines may still have side effects. Mild side effects, if experienced at all, usually go away on their own in the following days. More severe side effects are rare. If you have heard about any on the news – or through your friends or family – and want to get more information about them, ask your doctor or other health care team members to discuss these with you.

Fever, body aches, swelling, and/or tenderness at the site of injection are among the most common side effects. Any side effects that last longer than a few days or are very severe should be discussed with your physician.

How do vaccines keep me from becoming sick?

Vaccines prevent disease and the potential of complications from the disease or progression of the disease to other illnesses. The benefit of vaccination is that it works to protect individuals not only from the disease, but also from the serious side effects and progression of disease.

How often do I need vaccines?

The protection provided from vaccinations does not always last forever, so additional vaccinations, known as boosters, may be needed to maintain health and safety. Some vaccines need to be given serially so that protection from a given infection can be maintained.

What vaccines do you need?

Vaccination is one of the safest ways for you to protect your health, even if you are taking prescription medications for other medical reasons. Vaccines for people with kidney diseases are recommended based on a person's:

- **age** (e.g., RSV and Zoster),
- **medical need** (e.g., Hepatitis B for people on dialysis),
- **season of the year** (e.g., Influenza and COVID-19), and
- **general health** (e.g., Varicella, MM Rebella, or Tetanus, Diphtheria, and Pertussis).

Talk with your doctor or healthcare team member to learn more about what vaccines are recommended for you and your health needs.

Additional Resources

- "How You Can Be an Effective Vaccine Advocate | Immune Deficiency Foundation." n.d. https://primaryimmune.org/resources/news-articles/how-you-can-be-effective-vaccine-advocate.
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- "AAFP Advocacy Focus: Vaccines and Immunizations." n.d. https://www.aafp.org/advocacy/advocacy-topics/prevention-public-health/vaccines-immunizations.html.
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- "Adult Immunization Schedule, by Medical Indications | CDC." n.d. https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/hcp/imz/adult-conditions.html.
- "Immunizations: Vaccines and Adults – A Lifetime of Health." Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Vaccine Education Center. 2022. https://media.chop.edu/data/files/pdfs/vaccine-education-center-vaccines-adults.pdf.
- "10 Reasons to Get Vaccinated - NFID." n.d. NFID. https://www.nfid.org/immunization/why-get-vaccinated/10-reasons-to-get-vaccinated/.