

Protect Your Child By Protecting Yourself

Most parents are very faithful about getting their babies immunized against vaccine-preventable diseases. But there's more you can do. Because an infant's immune system is not developed, babies are not fully protected until the primary immunization series has been completed, usually by 18 months of age. Until then, the child is still at risk for contracting diseases like whooping cough and chickenpox. You can protect your baby by making sure that everyone in your home, and others who come in frequent contact with your child, are up-to-date with their immunizations. Parents, siblings, grandparents, other household members, and childcare providers should all have the immunizations listed below, to protect themselves and your child.

- **Influenza (flu) Vaccine** - Infants and young children are at great risk for complications from influenza, so parents and others in close contact with them need to be vaccinated. The problem is that flu viruses that cause the most severe disease are different from year to year, and thus the vaccine is changed too. That's why people need to get immunized EVERY YEAR. Also, people can be sick for several days before they have symptoms, so they can infect others – including your young child - without knowing it.
- **Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis) Vaccine** - Pertussis (whooping cough) is very common in Boulder County, with outbreaks occurring frequently in the community, especially in middle and high schools. Often, older children bring pertussis home to their younger siblings who can become seriously ill. Babies with pertussis can require hospitalization in intensive care for months, and even then, some die. Immunity gained from the vaccine, or from having the disease, fades after about 10 years, leaving people vulnerable to becoming infected again. Fortunately, now people between 10 and 65 years old can get the new Tdap vaccine that will protect them against pertussis as well as tetanus and diphtheria. You can help to protect your baby by making sure that people who are frequently near your baby, and who meet the age requirements, receive the Tdap immunization.
- **Varicella (Chickenpox)** – It's surprising that many adults and older children haven't had chickenpox disease, but it's true. While some people think the disease is not serious, it can be disastrous for infants, causing complications like pneumonia, severe bacterial skin infections, and meningitis (swelling of the membranes around the brain and spinal cord). If people in your household haven't had chickenpox they should receive two doses of the varicella vaccine. Just like whooping cough, vaccinating those around your child will help protect them.
- **MMR (Measles, Mumps, and Rubella)** – Measles, mumps, and rubella are rare diseases in the US. Unfortunately though, cases are beginning to occur when unvaccinated travelers become infected in other countries where the diseases exist. All three of these diseases can be severe in young infants. Making sure that people who spend time with your baby have immunity against them will protect your child.
- **Hepatitis B** - Hepatitis B disease is especially dangerous to infants. Ninety percent of infants who are infected develop a lasting and recurring disease, which very often leads to liver cancer later in life. People can be infected with hepatitis B for many years without knowing it – and can still give it others; the hepatitis B virus can remain alive on objects for up to two weeks. That's why it's a good idea for people to be tested that are in close contact to infants. If they are not infected, getting the three-dose series of the hepatitis B vaccine will protect them and your child.

It is impossible to guarantee that everyone who is around your baby is immune to childhood diseases. However, you can provide a blanket of protection for your child if you make sure those who are in closest contact are immunized. Ask your family members and even your babysitter if they are current on their immunizations - the answer matters.

Best Shots for Boulder County Kids is contributed by the Boulder County Immunization Coalition. We invite you to send your questions, comments, or suggestions to Carol Helwig of Boulder County Public Health at chelwig@bouldercounty.org or 303-413-7506.