

Vaccines Not Just for Babies: New Survey Reveals Teen Health May Be Impacted by Misperceptions

The Unity Consortium just released results from a national survey of parents, teens and healthcare providers that revealed some major areas for improvement in preventive health communications to teens. Nearly all parents say it's important to address "hot topics" to help their teens stay healthy, such as keeping them safe from STDs (92%), avoiding alcohol/drugs/smoking (95%), and getting enough sleep (94%), but put less emphasis on discussions around vaccination. While a vast majority of parents (92%) and teens (88%) believe it is important for all teens to be vaccinated, in reality teen vaccination rates are far lower than where they should be. For instance, less than 50% of male teens and 65% of female teens have received the first dose of the HPV vaccine. What are the reasons for this gap? The survey showed that both parents' and teens' attitudes towards preventive health may keep them from prioritizing important health strategies, like vaccination.

The survey found:

- Approximately 1 in 4 parents and teens (23% each) believe that vaccines are for babies and not as important for teens
- More than one-third of teens (34%) don't know how being vaccinated helps them
- Four in 10 parents (41%) (and more than half of teens) believe teens should only see a doctor when he/she feels sick, reducing opportunities to discuss preventive health measures, such as vaccines
- While most teens (92%) trust their doctor when seeking information about their health, nearly half (47%) agree they do not like talking to doctors or other healthcare providers

Vaccination thoughtleader Paul A. Offit, MD, Director of the Vaccine Education Center, attending physician in the Division of Infectious Diseases at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Unity Consortium advisor remarked on the survey results, saying, "While the vast majority of parents believe that teens want to shoulder more responsibility for their health, only half of doctors agree that teens want to be accountable. This disconnect widens the communications gap. Our goal in sharing these survey results is to encourage healthcare providers, parents and teens to communicate better about preventive health and vaccines. Because it's not an exaggeration to say that one shot can mean the difference between life and death."

Misperceptions about immunizations can have serious consequences

Surprisingly, given that science and research have validated the safety and overwhelming benefit of vaccines, nearly 6 in 10 parents (57%) and teens (57%) have safety concerns about vaccines. Among physicians, less than half (44%) have reminders in place for teens or their parents about missed vaccinations. This combination shows a clear gap in the opportunity to assess and discuss the need for vaccination as a vital part of preventive health and to vaccinate.

The CDC recommends that adolescents receive four vaccines to protect their health in the short and long-term: meningococcal (ACWY and B); Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis); Td Booster (tetanus and diphtheria); and HPV (human papillomavirus) for both boys and girls. The CDC also recommends an annual flu shot.

INSERT COMMENT FROM ADVOCACY ORG ON RESULTS AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR THEIR AUDIENCE

FINAL PARAGRAPH TO TARGET HCPS/IMMUNIZERS:

Unity Consortium recommends immunizers make concerted efforts to ensure that teens don't skip annual check-ups, especially at 11-12 and 16 years of age when vaccinations should be given. Reminder systems are vital. Unity Consortium developed a [validated intervention program](#) for immunizers that helps improve delivery of a confident, concise, and consistent recommendation for routinely recommended vaccines to adolescents ([called the Three Cs](#)), available on the Unity site. Also Unity has developed and advocates the INSPECT imperatives, which address adolescent vaccination challenges and solution-based elements based on experiences from adolescent health and immunization experts. To read more about Unity educational materials visit: Unity4TeenVax.org.

FINAL PARAGRAPH TO TARGET PARENTS/CONSUMERS:

Unity Consortium recommends parents visit the CDC website to review the vaccine schedule that details recommended ages and catch-up opportunities. Unity Consortium and the CDC also have available information that explains the benefits of vaccines. To encourage a lifelong habit of preventive health, parents can also encourage their teens to ask health questions of their healthcare providers (and prepare their questions in advance). Teens trust the information provided by healthcare providers and, therefore, should be encouraged to have a candid dialogue with them during appointments. To read more about the survey and review infographics visit: Unity4TeenVax.org.

About the Survey

The national survey was conducted online by Harris Poll on behalf of Unity. The survey was fielded from September 26 to October 7, 2016 among 506 teens aged 13-18, 515 parents with a child between the ages of 13-18, 105 pharmacists, and 405 physicians who specialized in either family practice, general practice, internal medicine or pediatrics, were duly licensed, spent 50% or more time in out-patient practice and 80% or more time in direct patient care, see at least 250 patients, on average, in a month, and regularly see teens for well visits. UNITY Consortium is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization that brings together diverse groups that share a common and passionate interest in adolescent and young adult health with a focus on prevention and immunization.