

Pneumococcal Vaccines: Questions and Answers

Question 1 — What is pneumococcal disease?

What is pneumococcal disease?

Answer

So pneumococcal disease is a group of diseases that are caused by a bacteria. Most of us are probably pretty familiar with the flu because we get our flu shot every year and that is actually caused by a virus.

Unlike the flu, caused by a bacteria: *Streptococcus pneumoniae*

The difference with pneumococcal disease is that it's caused by a bacteria. The name of that bacteria is *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and it can cause a variety of different diseases. The first of the three that we're most concerned about are diseases of the lungs that's called pneumonia, which a lot of us are probably pretty familiar with...

Can cause pneumonia, bacteremia, meningitis

The second is an infection of the bloodstream and that's called bacteremia and the third is an infection of the lining of the brain and that's called meningitis. So all three of those infections are actually quite serious and all of them can be fatal so pneumococcal disease is something to take very seriously. Certain groups of people are more likely to get pneumococcal disease and those that we're concerned about the most are people that are 65 or older.

People 65 and older

Or people and adults in particular who are 19 to 64 who have certain medical conditions. So, if you for example have diabetes or heart disease or if your immune system is impaired for some reason like if you HIV or if you're a smoker, you're more likely to be susceptible or to catch pneumococcal disease. So in those groups of people we want to make sure that they're vaccinated for the protection against the pneumococcal disease.

Question 2 — How is pneumococcal disease spread?

How is pneumococcal disease spread?

Answer

So pneumococcal disease is actually spread by close person to person contact.

From person to person in close contact

So the most likely way that someone will catch pneumococcal disease is actually by being around somebody who has the bacteria and either coughs or sneezes.

Through droplets in the air

And those droplets from the coughs or sneeze will go through the air and then the person who catches the disease from them will actually breathe in those droplets. So if you're around someone who has pneumococcal disease it's very important to kind of keep your distance, to try to make sure that person is shielding their coughs and their sneezes and to be as careful as you can, not contract the pneumococcal disease.

Question 3 — When do I need to get the vaccine?

When do I need to get the vaccine? I've heard that I might have to get two shots. Is that true?

Answer

So, yes for some people it is true that you do need two shots to help prevent pneumococcal disease. So we've got two that are on the market for adults. The first one is brand name Prevnar or you might know it as PREVNAR 13®. The second one is brand name PNEUMOVAX® 23. So these vaccines each work in slightly different ways and they also protect against slightly different types of the pneumococcal bacteria.

All adults age 65 or older need two pneumococcal vaccines

So if we're talking about adults that are age 65 or older, the vast majority of those people will need both types of that vaccine. So they'll generally need that PREVNAR 13 first and then one year later they'll need the PNEUMOVAX 23. And the great news about that is unlike the flu shot once you've received both of those vaccines and you're over 65, then you are protected and you don't need to receive any other pneumococcal vaccinations. For our younger adult population, those who are age 19 to 64 who are at high risk that we mentioned

Adults 19-64 that are at high risk need one or two pneumococcal vaccines

Those with diabetes, cigarette smokers and other chronic diseases, they will need either the PNEUMOVAX 23 or the PREVNAR 13 or potentially both...it depends on their specific risk factors and specific medical history. So if that is your age range and you think you might be eligible for the pneumococcal vaccination, either one or both, make sure you talk to your health care provider and don't be afraid to step up even if they haven't brought up the fact that you may need this vaccine. Go ahead and ask, it can't hurt to be your own advocate.

Impaired immune system lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, smokers

You can say, hey I think I may be at high risk for pneumococcal disease and I want to make sure I protect myself...is this something that I need and can start a conversation with your provider.

Question 4 — Does Medicare pay for the shots?

Does Medicare pay for the shots?

Answer

So the great news about having Medicare coverage for the pneumococcal vaccinations, Medicare Part B covers a pneumococcal shot. Part B also covers a different second shot one year later.

Is if you have the Part B part of Medicare, which is the doctor's office portion, then pneumococcal vaccinations should be covered for you. The way that works is you can receive one pneumococcal vaccination, and then one year later you can receive the second different type of pneumococcal vaccination. So as we talked about earlier, most adults 65 or older will need the PREVNAR 13 vaccine, followed one year later by the PNEUMOVAX 23 vaccine and in that sequence that will be covered by Medicare Part B.

For adults that are younger than 65 who have those specific chronic conditions that would make them eligible for pneumococcal vaccinations, that should be covered as well but you may want to talk directly with your healthcare provider and consult Medicare just to make sure you've got the interval space properly and everything is covered fully for you. Other good news is most commercial insurance also will cover the pneumococcal vaccinations for people that are eligible, but if you have any questions I would encourage you to contact your insurance company directly before receiving the vaccination.

Question 5 — Will it still work if I only get the first shot?

What if I forget to get my second shot? Will it still work?

Answer

So, we have specific recommendations, at least in our older adult population to get both pneumococcal vaccinations. So, what'll happen if you only do get one of them?

You will have partial but not optimal protection

The answer is essentially you will have partial protection, but you won't have full protection unless you get both vaccines. So there was some research that came out about three years ago that caused a change in the CDC's guidelines for pneumococcal vaccinations because we discovered that older adults that received both types of pneumococcal vaccinations will have optimal protection against pneumococcal disease.

So, it's great if you get one vaccination but if you get both you will definitely have more complete protection against all types of pneumococcal disease that are available in those vaccines. For adults that are younger than 65, there are certain groups that do only need one of the pneumococcal vaccinations. So in that case, the studies have shown us that both of those are not needed for those groups so if you're not sure whether you need one or both and you're under 65 make sure to have that conversation with your health care provider to make sure you get the vaccines you need.

Question 6 — Are the vaccines safe?

Are the vaccines safe?

Answer

So it's great to be thinking about these sorts of things and asking these questions. We want to make sure all the vaccines we receive are safe. We've already talked about some of the great benefits of getting a pneumococcal vaccination, we can prevent pneumonia, we can prevent brain infections, we can prevent blood infections. These are all very potentially serious diseases that we want to make sure that we have optimal protection for, but on the flip side of that, we want to make sure that the vaccines that we receive at the same time are safe just as they

are protecting us. So, a couple things to think about when getting your pneumococcal vaccinations:

Most people experience no or mild side effects

The vast majority of people do not have any side effects or they have very minimal side effects from these vaccines. So as you're probably aware of these vaccines are given in the upper part of the arm, right below the shoulder. So most of the side effects are localized, so they happen right around where that vaccination is given.

Soreness, redness, tiredness

So you might see some redness, you might have some tenderness in that area, some other side effects that you could potentially see is some tiredness after receiving the vaccination or a low grade fever, a fever that's not very high but it's something that you may notice. Fortunately, with the pneumococcal vaccinations, the other side effects tend to be relatively rare, but there are several sources that you can go to if you would like more information on that...so one reliable place to go to receive more information on the safety of vaccinations is called a vaccine information statement or a VIS.

That's provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and there's a couple of ways you can access that: One – any provider that's given you a vaccine should give that to you that you can read through before receiving the vaccine and also if you have access to the internet, they're available online. So all you need to do is go online:

For the Vaccine Information Statement go to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Website at www.cdc.gov/vaccines

And do a search for pneumonia shot VIS or pneumococcal vaccination information statement and you can pull that up and have a look at that information. So that will give you some very clear evidence based information to read about so that you know exactly what the safety has been shown for these pneumococcal vaccinations. And again, when we're talking about medical treatments whether they be vaccines or any other type of treatment, we always want to look at risk versus benefit. The benefits to getting a vaccination greatly outweigh the risks. We want to prevent those serious pneumococcal diseases even though we are having a small risk from the vaccine the benefit really does outweigh them and the protection that they provide us.