

U.S. Panel Urges That All Children Be Vaccinated for Hepatitis B

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Frustrated by the widespread reluctance of adults to be vaccinated against hepatitis B, a leading cause of serious illness and death, a Federal panel has recommended that all children be vaccinated instead.

It is the first time that the Immunization Practices Advisory Committee of the Public Health Service has recommended vaccinating children for a disease whose victims are almost always adults.

Although the committee cannot compel parents to have their children vaccinated, state health officials normally require schoolchildren to be immunized according to its guidelines.

A vaccine for hepatitis B was licensed a decade ago, but it has found little use, even among health workers, drug users, the sexually promiscuous and others at high risk of developing the disease. Since most Americans who get hepatitis B are infected as teen-agers or adults, the benefits of a hepatitis vaccine program will not be apparent for about 20 years. A New Approach

"This approach to immunize children to prevent a serious chronic adult disease has never been tried before," said Dr. Harold Margolis, the chief of the hepatitis branch at the Federal Centers for Disease Control.

He and other hepatitis experts said they thought it was an important step, and pediatricians said they believed the vaccination of children would be accepted by doctors in their field.

If children are required to have hepatitis vaccinations, it would be sixth childhood vaccine introduced since the late 1940's. The first was the single vaccine for diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus.

The hepatitis virus, like the AIDS virus, is spread by contact through sexual intercourse and by contact with contaminated blood. About 300,000 Americans become infected with the hepatitis B virus each year.

Most victims get better on their own, but one in 10 develops a chronic infection where the virus smolders in the liver, often leading to cirrhosis or liver cancer. About 1.25 million Americans have chronic infections, and many do not know it because they may have few or

no symptoms with their initial infection.

Despite the advent of the hepatitis vaccine, which Dr. Jules Dienstag, a specialist in the disease at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, calls "one of the triumphs of medicine," the incidence of hepatitis B has soared in the past decade, increasing by more than 60 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Lack of Predictability

As many as half the cases of hepatitis B occur in people who are not in high risk groups. "We just don't know how it is occurring, but we suspect a lot of it is sexually," Dr. Dienstag said.

Dr. Richard Aach, a hepatitis expert at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Cleveland, said he favored the strategy of vaccinating children because the vaccine "has not been well received" among adults. "Our strategies just have not worked," he said.

And Dr. Carol Phillips, a pediatrician at the University of Vermont who is a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' committee on infectious diseases, said pediatricians would endorse hepatitis B vaccinations. Hope for Lifetime Immunity

Americans spend \$700 million a year on the direct costs of hepatitis B infections, Dr. Margolis said. "And that does not even include the cost of liver transplants" for people whose livers are destroyed by the virus infection, he said.

Dr. Margolis said the vaccine, which would be injected along with the DPT vaccine at the ages of 2 months, 4 months and 6 months, would cost about \$20 a child or \$80 million a year for public health agencies. He said officials hoped that the three shots would give lifetime immunity against hepatitis B, but that there was no way to be sure because the vaccine had only been around for 10 years. Officials at the Centers for Disease Control estimate that a vaccine program would save \$2 in medical costs for every \$1 spent on the vaccine. Reason for Concern

Public health experts have been concerned about how few Americans have been vaccinated. Dr. Margolis said, for example, that only 40 percent of health-care workers were vaccinated.

Dr. Robert Perillo, a hepatitis expert at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in St. Louis, said surveys of health-care workers showed that they underestimated their chances of getting hepatitis and rationalized not being vaccinated by saying they worried that the vaccine itself might be more risky than the chance they would get the disease.

Dr. Perillo, who said the vaccine was at least 90 percent effective, emphasized that this fear was unjustified because the vaccine appeared to be one of the safest known. Dr. Margolis said the vaccine had been given to millions of children in Asia without any adverse effects.

Dr. Perillo said that he and others had learned that "if you make this vaccine a volitional thing, it's not going to happen." So he favors requiring it for children.