



For Immediate Release:
July 31, 2003

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Immunization Rates High Across the Nation, But Infectious Disease Still Threatens Many Cities

Washington, D.C., July 31, 2003 – Results from the 2002 National Immunization Survey released today indicate that immunization coverage among children 19-35 months remains at an all-time high, with national coverage rates at 75 percent. However, levels in certain states and urban areas, with rates as low as 57 percent in some major cities, and public misconceptions about the need for vaccines, put communities at risk for the spread of health-threatening infectious disease.¹

Survey findings were presented at a press conference today hosted by the National Partnership for Immunization (NPI) to kick off National Immunization Awareness Month (NIAM).

The National Immunization Survey, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), shows a substantial nationwide increase in coverage among children for varicella (chickenpox) and pneumococcal vaccines. These gains are applauded by the CDC, though the agency acknowledged the need to keep these levels high.

“Even though immunization coverage among children in the United States is the highest ever recorded for most vaccines, we must not forget that these diseases once existed and could easily return if we become complacent and let down our guard,” said Dr. Walter A. Orenstein, Director of the CDC National Immunization Program (NIP). **“We cannot take our prevention successes for granted. Many challenges remain.”**

In addition to coverage gaps, new NPI research also released today gives insight into the barriers that prevent some people in the United States from getting immunized.² An estimated 15 percent of the adult population believes that vaccines are not necessary to prevent certain diseases. **Of the 15 percent, 64 percent do not believe it is easy to get trusted information about immunization.** Moreover, 46 percent of adults with a child aged 19 or younger living at home do not believe that it is important to vaccinate their child to protect against the spread of disease in their community.

“A substantial minority of adults now question the need for immunization, citing a variety of reasons from safety and value to cost for not being vaccinated,” said David A. Neumann, PhD, NPI Executive Director. **“The public health community and health care providers must address these misconceptions and barriers to immunization to eliminate the disparities in coverage that threaten the health of our families and communities.”**

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¹ Estimated vaccine coverage levels with the 4:3:1:3:3 series.

² Porter Novelli. (2002). *HealthStyles* Syndicated Survey Data. Washington, D.C.

Adults who decide not to be immunized, or who refuse to immunize their children, risk contracting preventable diseases that can then be passed to others within the community.

“Vaccines are the most widely used and effective means of protecting our communities against infectious disease,” said Neumann. “While annual cases of common vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles, mumps, and rubella, are on the decline, others, such as pertussis or whooping cough, are rising. Adhering to vaccine guidelines for children, adolescents, and adults is our best defense against these life-threatening and debilitating illnesses.”

Lynn Frank, Chief of Public Health Services for the Department of Health and Human Services in Montgomery County, Maryland, shared her community’s experience with an outbreak of pertussis that infected students in a Bethesda school. In addition, Mary-Clayton Enderlein, from Washington state, gave personal testimony of contracting pertussis (whooping cough) from an unvaccinated child while nine months pregnant. Enderlein then transmitted the disease with her first kiss to her newborn son, a kiss that led to a trip to the emergency room for the infant, a long hospital stay, and months of recovery.

NPI sponsors National Immunization Awareness Month (NIAM) to raise awareness of the importance of immunizations to avoid infectious disease and its devastating consequences.

NIAM highlights the need for improving national immunization coverage levels and encourages all people to protect their health by being immunized against infectious diseases. NIAM is commemorated in August—a time when children are returning to school, college students are moving into dormitories, and the influenza season is only a few months away—to remind the nation that people of all ages require timely immunization for good health.

The National Partnership for Immunization (NPI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to reducing the nationwide incidence of vaccine-preventable diseases through increased use of licensed vaccines. The mission of NPI is to encourage greater acceptance and use of immunization for all ages through partnerships with public and private organizations.

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