

Community Weekly
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Vaccinating Teens
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Earlier this month, the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine was determined to be a safe choice for teenagers aged 12-15 years old. While children are less likely to become seriously ill if infected, there are a number of reasons that vaccinating teens will help in our collective fight against COVID-19.

First, even though they are much less likely to become seriously ill with COVID-19, children can still become infected, get sick, and spread it to other people. Since the pandemic began last year, more than 1.5 million children between 12-17 years old have been infected with COVID-19, more than 13,000 have been hospitalized, almost 4000 have had a complication called “multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children” (MIS-C), and more than 120 have died with COVID-19. While the disease risks are well-known, it is also important to be aware of the ongoing monitoring of all vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is currently investigating rare reports of myocarditis and pericarditis (inflammation of the muscles or lining of the heart) in young people after vaccination. The reported cases have been mild and self-limited. At this time, given the known risks of the disease, the CDC continues to recommend COVID-19 vaccination for those over age 12.

Second, even if your teen has already had COVID-19, his or her natural immunity after being sick may not be as long-lasting as the protection obtained from a vaccine. Vaccination is the best way to prevent COVID-19 infection.

Third, when young people are included among the vaccinated, the virus finds fewer people to infect and community transmission goes down. Having your child vaccinated protects your child and everyone your child has contact with. Increasing vaccination rates across all age groups approved for vaccine best helps protect the entire community.

Fourth, having your child vaccinated has the added convenience of not having to quarantine if they are exposed to someone with COVID-19.

Finally, your vaccinated child may be able to travel to places that require vaccinations.

In the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts, all of our school system superintendents worked quickly to help us coordinate voluntary, in-school vaccination clinics for students before the school year draws to a close. We’ve been pleased to see strong parental support in getting their children vaccinated. Our healthcare partners at Carilion Clinic and volunteers from the Virginia Medical Reserve Corps also helped us to quickly and efficiently arrange these clinics.

While it is certainly true that having more young people vaccinated will help reduce spread in the entire community, it is premature to remove masking from school settings because so many children are not yet eligible for vaccine. Currently Pfizer and Moderna are running nationwide clinical trials for children 6 months to 11 years old. Hopefully, an approved vaccine will be ready for this age group late in the fall or in early 2022.

Widespread vaccination is a critical tool to help stop the pandemic. We know COVID-19 vaccines are effective at preventing COVID-19 disease, especially severe illness and death. It has been a joy to see many of our youth appearing to be smiling through their masks after receiving that initial shot, pleased at the thought of returning to previously restricted activities such as traveling and playing with friends.