


A “New” Old Vaccine: Prevnar 13

Ten years ago I watched a very sick, feverish toddler arch his back  on my exam table while a high pitched screech weakly escaped his mouth as I tried to examine him. Attempts by his mother to cradle him in her arms only resulted in more pain.

The diagnosis — bacterial meningitis, puss in the spinal cord and around the brain.

The culprit —a potentially deadly germ called *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.

A few months after I saw that toddler with meningitis, a vaccine against Strep pneumoniae, under the brand name Prevnar-7, entered the market. I often wonder how outcomes would have differed for that toddler if the vaccine had been released earlier.

In addition to causing bacterial meningitis in children, this pneumococcal germ is also responsible for other forms of invasive disease such as pneumonia and overwhelming infection in the blood (sepsis). After Prevnar-7 entered the market in 2000, the number of children contracting invasive pneumococcal disease dropped by 76 percent. This decrease was seen in children under age five years, the most common age group for contracting pneumococcal disease. Vaccines at work!

The original Prevnar-7 offered protection against 7 types of the pneumococcal germ. But other types which weren't targeted by Prevnar continued to cause infections. A new vaccine called Prevnar-13 offers protection against six additional types.

How does the release of the new Prevnar-13 affect your child? Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics released its immunization recommendations:

—If your child has never been immunized against *Pneumococcus*, he will

receive Prevnar-13 instead of Prevnar-7 on the same schedule as in the past. The series of four doses total are given at two months of age, four months, six months, and lastly a booster dose at 12-15 months of age.

–If your child is under five years old but has completed the full Prevnar-7 schedule, he will need at least one dose of Prevnar-13 to be fully protected.

–If your child is in the middle of the Prevnar series, he will likely complete the series with Prevnar-13.

–Children from 6 years to 18 years of age who are at very high risk for complications (e.g., children with sickle cell anemia and cochlear implants) may consider at least one dose of Prevnar-13 along with their usual “high risk” pneumovax 23 vaccine.

At this point there aren’t any recommendations to immunize non-high-risk children after five years of age because for most children, the risk of contracting life-threatening illness from this germ dramatically decreases after age five.

There’s more protection out there against more streptococcal pneumonia. Go get it!

For the full AAP recommendations see the online version of the AAP Policy Statement May 24, 2010 at www.pediatrics.org.

See also: Center for Disease Control March 12, 2010 *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* for information about the impact of Prevnar on invasive pneumococcal disease.

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