

Family Physician Dr. James Bigham on the Importance of Immunizations

Why are vaccines an important part of preventive care for patients of every age?

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Vaccines are an opportunity for us to optimize health and well-being for our patients and in family medicine and just in primary care in general. We want to focus on that.

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Though we're experts in treating illness, if we can help our patients maintain their well-being, it's, I think it's an imperative that we have and at any age we're potentially vulnerable to contracting an illness.

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And so every one of us, just like we want to implement car safety seatbelts and car seats at any age, I often think about vaccines in a similar fashion.

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The idea being, doesn't matter how old you are, you may have risk of potentially being exposed to a vaccine preventable illness.

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We have safe and effective vaccines. And so to me, it makes a lot of sense to ensure my patients have access to those. 1:02

How do family physicians play a crucial role in providing vaccines for their communities?

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As a family physician, we're often the front line in the first point of contact for healthcare individuals receive.

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And as a primary care physician, we also have this unique opportunity to care for many folks across the family. So we have a multi generational kind of practice model, which I love, and it gives us a chance to lean in and learn about our patients.

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We cultivate trust and as we learn about our patients and as we share with them the things that often are shared values like trying to prevent illness, optimized well-being, we have a chance to actually help guide them to make the right choices for themselves.

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And as trusted messengers, we have an important role to play also in a time and a space where there's a lot of information out there that can be confusing.

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The science sometimes can be complex. Trying to find a resource online can also be a real challenge, and what we can do is help folks understand where the good data is.

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We can also lean into our past experience of caring for them. And I think as we help them understand that we're on their team and on their side trying to optimize their well-being, we help them make the right choices for themselves and their families. 2:26

How do family physicians address misinformation and build vaccine confidence among patients and families? What are the best ways to approach those difficult conversations?

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We've been so successful at treating many of these vaccine preventable illnesses that many patients are no longer familiar with them. And so things like measles and polio are things that feel like they're of the past and so people don't have that lived experience.

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And so I think then people maybe may fall prey to information that's not accurate because they don't have that lived experience. They can't actually filter out or sift and winnow what is actually true.

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I'll often try to offer information that I know has a solid footing and evidence-based medicine or solid understanding of just the science.

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And if we can stick to the science that we know is foundational, we can actually help our patients make a really informed decision which is based on facts.

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As a patient, I think it's really important to know that your family physician cares about you and as a trusted person, you can go to with any question you have about vaccines. We're always going to be on the side of keeping you healthy.

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We're always going to be on the side of wanting to make sure that we ensure everything that you're we're doing as far as your Healthcare is in line with your values. And a conversation goes a long way as far as ensuring that all of your questions are answered.

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We don't want to in any way rush the decision to receive a vaccine. The beauty of the relationship we have as family physicians is it's an ongoing relationship. And so there may be a time to to come back and and discuss again questions or concerns.

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We're happy to share resources with patients as well to make sure that any question is answered so that we all feel good about the vaccines we're receiving.

Kindergarten vaccination rates have declined in recent years What advice do you give to parents about catching up?

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Your kindergarten vaccines are important because as kids are going to go and have a lot more exposures in the school system, we want to ensure that they're protected against things like varicella, which is chicken pox, as well as measles, mumps, rubella.

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And that second measles, mumps, rubella vaccine is at kindergarten age is really to make sure we get good lifelong protection. And so, really important before we have exposure to ensure we're protected.

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Unfortunately, we can't go back in time and give a vaccine after someone's been exposed and gets sick and so we have to make sure we're doing this early before the exposure happens.

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And sometimes your parents feel like, well, it's a busy time of, of life, a busy season. We don't have time for it. And, and I just like to frame it as we want to make sure we're keeping our kids healthy. We want to make sure they can stay in school. We don't want them home from school or, or missing out on, you know, time with, with their classmates or learning experiences.

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And so we really do want to make sure before we get to school, we do that.

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If it just so happens that we're overdue for vaccines, there's no such thing as too late. I would say if you're in first grade or second grade and haven't done those shots yet, it's a great time to do it.

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And I think as family physicians, as a primary care team, we're always happy to see folks who maybe are behind on the vaccine schedule, we love the chance just to have an opportunity to help them catch up. 5:43

We often think about children when it comes to immunizations. Why are adult vaccinations important as well?

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The vast majority of our population is over age 18, so about 80% of us are over 18 or in that adult range. And so it's important that all of us are doing our part to make sure that we're preventing illness for ourselves.

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And that's foundational things like hand washing, staying home when you're sick. But I also think getting vaccines are an important part of that.

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We also know about vaccines and helping prevent vaccine preventable illnesses is that we actually need a pretty decent sized population to get vaccinations so we can reduce the risk of spread to others.

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I think all of us have a role to play in keeping ourselves healthy, but also in protecting folks that might be in our family who are immune compromised or other folks in our community who may, even if they got a vaccine, not have as robust of a reaction as far as a protective element of the vaccine.

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So I think we do it for ourselves to say well, but also it's important for us to do it for others in the community.

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And as we get older, especially our older adults, we unfortunately have a reduction in how well our immune system is able to fight off infection. And so we're often for patients 65 and older, we'll want to really make sure those folks are getting vaccinated to do everything we can to reduce the risk of a severe infection. 7:10