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NEWS

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***Some teen-agers should be immunized for measles again.

DALLAS--With the recent outbreak of measles in two Texas universities, there is some confusion about who is immune to the disease.

"People who are 'college age' (17 to 19) who were immunized for measles with the live vaccine before they were a year old or received gamma globulin with the vaccine should be immunized again," says Dr. John Nelson, professor of Pediatrics at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas and co-editor of Pediatric Infectious Disease.

"Those who were vaccinated with the killed virus between '63 and '67 do not have reliable immunity to measles, and they may have a bad reaction when given the live virus vaccine. Because measles is rare in the U.S., these people should not be vaccinated. However, if they are going to an area where measles is common, they should be. A reaction is better than having the measles."

Everyone born before 1957 is probably immune because of exposure to the virus, says Nelson. Of those born in 1957 or later, "if they had measles documented by a doctor or received vaccine after their first birthday, they don't need to be immunized."

Killed measles vaccine was introduced in 1963 and was used until 1967 in the U.S. and until 1970 in Canada. The vaccine was usually given before the first birthday. When live vaccine was introduced, it was given in conjunction with gamma globulin. It was soon learned that gamma globulin interfered with the immune reaction leaving some children unprotected. In addition, when small babies are immunized, antibodies from the mother also interfere. Fifteen months of age is the best time for measles immunization, but immunization at 12 months is acceptable.

"Because measles has almost been eradicated in the U.S. and only brief, localized outbreaks are occurring, when there is an outbreak, as in Waco, don't give vaccine to babies," says Nelson. "Gamma globulin without vaccine given to babies from six to 12 months old will protect them for a short time--as long as the outbreak lasts. The antibodies the baby is born with will protect 95 to 98 percent of the babies under six months. Only those over 12 months should receive the vaccine."

The reason public health officials have worked so hard to stamp out measles, a seemingly harmless childhood disease, is that the disease sometimes leads to pneumonia or encephalitis, both of which can be fatal. Encephalitis occurs about once in every 1,000 cases of measles.

According to an article recently published in Pediatric Infectious Disease, measles has practically been eradicated in the U.S. In the decade before the measles vaccine was introduced, 400,000 to 500,000 cases and nearly 500 deaths due to measles were reported each year. Because of the nationwide Childhood Immunization Initiative begun in 1977, measles reached an all-time low of 3,032 cases in 1981. Eighteen percent of those cases occurred in people who picked up measles in a foreign country and the people they exposed on their return to the U.S.

(over)

The death rate from measles has also declined drastically. From an average of 2.23 deaths per million population in 1960-62 the rate has decreased to an average of 0.06 deaths per million in 1976-78 (the last years for which figures are available).

The target date for measles eradication in the U.S. was October 1982. Because of the recent outbreaks in Texas and Florida and the one at Disneyland in California that spread to 14-16 states, the goal was not reached. But says Nelson, "We hope to have complete eradication soon."

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