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Parent and guardian concerns about childhood COVID-19 vaccine addressed at Town Hall

By Jennifer Wake

In an effort to address questions from parents and guardians following the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's emergency authorization of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 5-11, Contra Costa County Superintendent of Schools Lynn Mackey facilitated a town hall Nov. 4 on Zoom with a panel of health officials and pediatricians.

Contra Costa Health Services Deputy Health Officer, Dr. Sofo, Mekuria, opened the town hall with sobering statistics about COVID-19 and kids. Nationally, more than 2 million cases have occurred over the course of the pandemic in the 5-11 age group at the time the COVID-19 vaccine was approved. A recent CDC study showed that cases and hospitalizations in general were 10 times higher for unvaccinated adolescents than in vaccinated adolescents. Since the pandemic began for 5- to 11-year-olds, there have been 8,000 hospitalizations in that age group nationwide, with 120 residents under age 18 hospitalized in Contra Costa County. In the last 18 months, Mekuria noted, 680 patients under age 18 have died from COVID in the United States.

Of the many questions received on Zoom from participants, Mackey pulled the most common concerns for the panelists to discuss, such as why children should need this vaccination if they are healthy and COVID symptoms are typically mild.

Dr. Robin Meezan, Medical Director of Pediatrics with John Muir Health, recommends the vaccine and said even if the condition is often mild, it's still important to protect children and those in our community who have underlying conditions.

Dr. Rahul Parikh, who is a pediatrician and assistant physician-in-chief with Kaiser Permanente, said this is an important conversation to be having in the community. "In an age when we have a vaccine that's 90% effective, which is unprecedented after two doses, it becomes sad and senseless when you can help prevent disease in your child." COVID is simply a virus that wants to get into a body and replicate, he said. "Think about COVID not just as a me and my family question, but about all of us and how we can protect our communities."

Dr. Dipti Perot, family practice doctor and a Lifelong Medical Care COVID team provider, added that around 30% of kids hospitalized with COVID did not have underlying conditions, and for those who had COVID "there is no guarantee you'll have antibodies after resolution of infection. Just because you've had COVID doesn't mean you won't get it again," she said, "and we have seen that it was much worse the second time around for all ages."

Many participants asked why you can still get sick after being vaccinated. Dr. Chris Farnitano, Health Officer of Contra Costa Health Services, said the COVID-19 vaccine is much like the measles vaccine, where boosters are required and rare outbreaks among the vaccinated are typically mild. "The COVID vaccine is like that; it cuts the risk of getting severe COVID and being in the hospital or dying by 90% - no vaccine is 100% effective." Later, Farnitano noted that every one of the 680 deaths of children is a tragedy, and there have been so many other children who have been left without a parent due to COVID.

According to Perot, COVID in the last year is No. 6 in the top 10 causes of death for kids, and it's a vaccine preventable death. Over 5,000 children have ended up in ICUs with an inflammatory syndrome and left with severe disability. "It's become so politicized. . We have to look at each other and protect each other," she said. "As COVID continues to circulate in our communities, every person, especially the unvaccinated, becomes a reservoir for these new variants."

In closing, Mackey noted that there are currently no mandates for the COVID-19 vaccine in the 5-11 age group in Contra Costa County schools. She added that future town hall discussions are planned and they will post answers to the many other questions asked during the town hall at www.cccoe.k12.ca.us. To schedule a vaccination, you can visit cchealth.org or contact local retail pharmacies or health care providers.

To view the entire Town Hall presentation on YouTube, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkZxbLT3KNI>

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