New Vaccines, New Questions

By: Robert A. Sandhaus, MD, PhD, AlphaNet Medical Director

With the development of new vaccines and the rise in popularity of others, AlphaNet may benefit from getting some of these vaccines in order to protect themselves against certain illnesses. Vaccines, also known as immunizations or simply ‘shots’, are usually injections that cause your immunity against specific infections. Most of us received a series of immunizations as children. Currently, children should be immunized against polio, tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough, meningococcal infection, measles, mumps, chickenpox, German measles (rubella), hepatitis, and others. Adults are at risk for for lung and liver disease and a number of infections can increase the risk of such disorders or make an existing disease worse. Therefore, many AlphaNet are recommended to receive immunizations as adults. Annual flu shots are one such recommendation, as is immunization against common bugs that cause pneumonia.

Pneumonia vaccine

For the past several decades, the pneumonia vaccine in wide use has been Pneumovax. There is now a new vaccine called Prevnar 13 or PCV13. It prevents a more current spectrum of bugs that cause pneumonia and meningitis and should probably be used the next time you are due for a pneumonia vaccine, about once every 5 years. There is currently no specific recommendation about whether everyone who has had a Pneumovax injection less than 5 years ago should receive the PCV13 vaccination sooner than 5 years after the Pneumovax. There has been recommended that immunocompromised individuals (such as transplant recipients) receive both Pneumovax and PCV13, however, it was recommended that if you received Pneumovax in the past year, you shouldn’t receive PCV13 sooner than 1 year after the Pneumovax.

Shingles vaccine

A shingles vaccine has recently become available. It immunizes people against the virus herpes Zoster. This virus causes chickenpox in people who have never been inflected with this virus before and can cause shingles (a painful, blistering skin rash) in people who have had chickenpox in the past (often the distant past). The Herpex Zoster virus lives in the nerves of people who have had chickenpox in the past and, as you get older or develop certain chronic illnesses, can reactivate as shingles. The shingles vaccine is an injection that builds up your immunity to the shingles-causing virus. Pneumovax prevents shingles as if it shingles caused, minimize the effects of this infection. In people who have already had an episode of shingles, the vaccine can prevent or minimize recurrence.

The shingles vaccine is a live virus vaccine. It is recommend for all adults over 50 years of age or any adult who has had a shingles infection in the past. Because the vaccine is a live virus, it should not be given to someone who is immunosuppressed, such as people who have a long or liver transplant. In fact, family members of transplant recipients should avoid seeing their doctor before being vaccinated as they can infect their transplanted relative if they receive the vaccine.

Whopping cough (pertussis) vaccine

Most of us were immunized against whooping cough or pertussis when we were children. We now know that the immunity to the bacteria that causes whooping cough rarely extends to adults. In addition, there is a growing epidemic of whooping cough in the U.S. Therefore, it is recommended that all adults 65 years old and above be revaccinated against pertussis. This is usually done with a Tdap vaccine which covers tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis. You only need this vaccination once as an adult. If you have Alpha-1, especially if you have lung disease, your doctor may well recommend immunization even if you are younger than age 65. Immunization for adults younger than age 65 is also recommended if you are regularly exposed to infants or young children.

There are a number of other vaccinations recommended for patients with Alpha-1, including hepatitis immunizations. It is recommended that you consult your doctor to find out if your vaccinations are up-to-date.
Can Alphas Donate Blood?  

According to The Big Fan Reference Guide (BFRG), “Individuals with Alpha-1 may donate blood as long as they do not have emphysema or liver disease and are not receiving augmentation therapy. Plasma donation may be made by Alpha-1; however, that decision will be made by the physician in charge of the plasma into which you wish to make your donation. Your plasma may be used for other plasma producers not related to making Alpha-1 augmentation therapies. Carriers of Alpha-1 may donate both blood and plasma. Your local blood donation center may be able to provide more information.”

Can Exercise Reverse Alpha-1 COPD?  

“The BFRG states that while exercise cannot reverse Alpha-1, it can change the way you feel and function. “In Alphas with moderate to severe COPD, exercise can reduce disability by improving endurance, breathing efficiency and dyspnea (shortness of breath) tolerance.” You should begin with a light exercise routine and then slowly work up to more moderate exercise over time, which should then be followed on a consistent basis. Consult your doctor before starting any exercise routine to ensure that you are healthy enough to do so.

Why Are Diet and Nutrition So Important to the Health of Alphas?  

While nutritional needs and dietary recommendations for Alphas are similar to those for individuals without Alpha-1, there is an additional incentive for Alphas to follow healthy diet and nutrition guidelines. According to the BFRG, “Good nutrition may help Alphas protect lung function and improve breathing by providing the energy and muscle tone needed to maintain effective respiratory effort. The diet may also help to control emphysema and bronchitis.”

What’s the Best Philosophy for Fighting Pulmonary Exacerbations?  

“The BFRG notes that “the best philosophy for fighting exacerbations is to let them have their way and early on, know your lung’s muscle requirements and don’t try to control them. Continue with your usual medications, and consult your own physician to see if you should start a regimen of steroids and/or antibiotics.”

Step Forward Study Updates  

- We have entered the last year of the 5-year-long clinical trial, with the conclusion being May 1, 2014.
- The Daily Diary Sweepstakes is on-going so we encourage you to continue entering your data either online or using the mail-in postcards in order to qualify for the monthly drawing.
- If you have any SFS-related questions, please contact Ashley Chase at achase@alphanet.org.

SFS Sweepstakes Winner Steps Up to the Challenge  

Kevin Butikofer of Idaho Falls, Idaho was selected as the Step Forward Study Sweepstakes nearly grand prize winner for 2012. As a reward for his hard work and commitment to the SFS study—a 5-year-long clinical trial which began in September 2009 that tracks the effects of diet and exercise on the health of Alpha-1 patients—Kevin selected an iPad as his prize. He notes, “I believe the best philosophy for fighting exacerbations is to let them have their way and early on, know your lung’s muscle requirements and don’t try to control them.”

Kevin was told by his physician, “I have lost so much weight that my muscles have deteriorated so I stay active. I have had a long-standing back problem and, in order to prevent further strain on it, he exercises regularly. “The only way I can keep walking every day is by doing my exercises and stretching. I do it stay active and because I want to be able to go to the grocery store without pain. I like to exercise!”

Kevin’s daily routine includes walking and stretching to maintain his range of motion. “I have always felt like it was my job to do what I could for others,” says Kevin. “I believe the more active Alphas are, the healthier they will be overall.”

Kevin is happy to help others who may have Alpha-1. “I will be happy to tell you what my daily routine is in order to maintain proper health.”

Don’t forget to stop by the AlphaNet Booth at the National Education Conference to pick up your complimentary digital thermometer!  

AlphaNet Welcomes You to Alphaville!  

Get the most comprehensive Alpha-1 information available by accessing our Big Fan Reference Guide and Skinny Little Reference Guide collection.  

Visit www.alphanet.org and click on the BFRG link to register.