What Parents Need To Know About Infant Health

(StatePoint) New parents want to do what’s best for their babies. With National Infant Immunization Week scheduled for April 23-30, now is a great time to make sure the babies in your life are on track with their immunizations.

Infants are born with natural immunity to some diseases, inherited from their mothers, but this immunity soon wanes and is gone by 6 months. That’s why pediatricians start immunizing infants against infectious diseases at birth – by the time their inherited immunity is gone, they will be protected by vaccines.

“The diseases we immunize infants against are all still here, including measles, whooping cough, and Hib meningitis,” says Dr. O. Marion Burton, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). “These diseases are dangerous and sometimes deadly. In California, 10 infants died of whooping cough, or pertussis, in 2010, the worst epidemic in more than 40 years.”

Other states across the country have seen similar whooping cough epidemics as well as outbreaks of other vaccine-preventable diseases. That’s why it’s important to vaccinate infants against pertussis as soon as they are old enough -- around 2 months -- and to follow the recommended schedule for other vaccines.

The AAP recommends the following immunization schedule during the first year:

- **Hepatitis B vaccine at birth, 1-2 months, and 6-12 months.** While adults exposed to hepatitis B have only a 10 percent chance of becoming chronic carriers of the virus, babies have a more than 95 percent chance of developing severe health problems, including liver cancer, if they are exposed. Young children have been infected by becoming “blood brothers” or sharing chewing gum. Children can become infected from caretakers, family members or friends who may not know their own hepatitis B status.

- **Rotavirus, Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis, Haemophilus influenzae type b, Pneumococcal, and inactivated Poliovirus vaccine between 2 and 18 months.** Immunization has made these diseases relatively rare in the U.S., but they are not eradicated, and so they remain a constant threat to infant health. Vaccination is the only way to not only protect your child, but prevent an outbreak in your community.

- **Yearly influenza vaccine after 6 months of age.** Influenza is an unpredictable virus and in some children will cause severe illness, even death. Influenza kills scores of children every single year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

- **Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Varicella and Hepatitis A after 12 months.** Measles cases in the U.S. are usually “imported” by people who travel outside the United States, become infected and return home. The virus is so contagious, that any unvaccinated person nearby will become sick. This happened in 2008, when an infected traveler exposed dozens of other people, including children whose parents decided not to immunize them.

The AAP advises parents to adhere to their pediatrician’s recommendations regarding vaccine schedules. It is the best way to ensure children are protected from diseases when they are most vulnerable.

For more information on immunizations and how to best protect your child, visit www.aap.org/immunization.