

As we struggle to find our “new normal” in these chaotic pandemic times, we have reasons to be optimistic. Vaccines are available that prevent serious illness and death from COVID. Scientists around the world continue to make progress in understanding the COVID-19 virus and who is

## from the study team

at risk to develop serious illness and long-term symptoms. As COVID-19 and its variants will likely remain a concern in the coming year, we all need to follow public health recommendations to reduce the spread of infection—starting with vaccination, if you are eligible.

In SJLife news, the study team is excited to announce that Dr. Kirsten (Kiri) Ness has assumed the position of Co-Principal Investigator of SJLife.

Dr. Ness, a physical therapist and epidemiologist, is likely well known to many study participants for her research on improving physical performance in childhood cancer survivors. We thank Dr. Robison for his almost 15 years of leadership of SJLife and are grateful that he will remain involved as senior advisor.

In this issue, Dr. Diego Hijano, an infectious diseases specialist at St. Jude, addresses concerns from survivors about COVID-19 and vaccination. We hope this information will be helpful in guiding your decision-making.

This LIFELINE issue also highlights the importance of getting back on track with other preventive care and immunizations that were missed during the pandemic. In particular, adolescent vaccination rates have declined, especially for human papillomavirus (HPV). Dr. Heather Brandt, director of St. Jude's newly established HPV Cancer *cont. on page 4*



**Melissa M. Hudson, MD**  
Co-Principal Investigator,  
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**Kiri Ness, PT, PhD**  
Co-Principal Investigator,  
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# Playing pandemic catch-up

The COVID-19 Case Investigation and Contact Tracing Team, organized and led by Diego Hijano, MD (bottom row, third from left). Also pictured: Tim Folsie, MD (middle row, first from right).

## Support your and your family's health with preventive care & immunizations

**D**uring last year's pandemic shutdowns, preventive healthcare, including routine immunizations for both children and adults, may not have been at the top of everyone's to-do list. But now is a great time to play catch-up and protect your own and family members' health.

### Effects of the pandemic on healthcare

Throughout the pandemic, there have been numerous challenges, many the direct result of shutdowns, lack of childcare, and fear and consequences of COVID exposure. The disruption caused by COVID has made general healthcare harder or at times impossible to access. As a result, people have often had to postpone or skip a variety of health-related services, including routine check-ups, immunizations, and recommended cancer screenings. For example, one study found that in April 2020, visits to doctors' offices fell nearly 60%. Over time, it is anticipated that *cont. on page 4*

# COVID, vaccines, & childhood cancer survivors

## Common questions & expert answers from Diego Hijano, MD, St. Jude Department of Infectious Diseases

During the pandemic, Dr. Hijano worked with numerous St. Jude staff to keep employees, patients, and families healthy. He currently leads the team that supports employees who are exposed to or infected with COVID-19 and co-leads the employee and family vaccination program.

**Q:** Are you seeing any unique risks of COVID for childhood cancer survivors?

**A:** Being a survivor isn't the main driver of risk, it's specific health conditions you may have after cancer treatment. For example, if a survivor has chronic lung disease or lung problems, high blood pressure, heart problems, obesity, or diabetes, those are risk factors for severe COVID.

**Q:** What about COVID vaccine side effects and survivors—any unique effects?

**A:** Vaccine side effects haven't been different for cancer survivors than for people without a history of cancer.

**Q:** Is there any way the vaccines could cause a relapse?

**A:** No, COVID vaccines haven't been associated with a risk of cancer relapse.

**Q:** Are the mRNA vaccines more effective than the Johnson & Johnson vaccine?

**A:** The vaccine effectiveness rates can't be compared because they were tested in completely different settings: different countries, different timepoints, and with different strains of the virus. What is clear is that all three vaccines work equally well in preventing serious illness and death from COVID infections.

**Q:** Which is the best vaccine to get?

**A:** The best vaccine is the first one available to you.

**Q:** Should I be worried about the pause that occurred in the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine?

**A:** The pause was due to routine safety procedures after reports suggested an increased risk of blood clots. Review of the data showed that blood clots are rare—occurring in 2 to 3 cases per million vaccinated. (Women ages 20 to 50 are at a slightly higher risk.) COVID infection itself can cause blood clots and other serious illnesses, so the benefits of vaccination still outweigh the rare risk of blood clots.

**Q:** Do survivors who are young and healthy need a vaccine?

**A:** Yes. While it's rare for healthy young people to have a more severe



COVID infection, we don't know yet how to predict who in this group may be at high risk. That is why vaccination is important for everyone who is eligible.

**Q:** Do survivors who had COVID need a vaccine?

**A:** Yes. Getting the vaccine after having COVID is important because it will still boost your defenses against the virus.

**Q:** What do you say to people who are frustrated about how COVID information has changed over time?

**A:** Just like the flu and all other viruses, the COVID virus changes. The good news is that we are able to monitor the virus and adapt vaccines and our responses to better fight it. And so far, all three U.S. vaccines remain effective in preventing severe infection from the variants that have been identified.

**Q:** What's the most important thing you want survivors to know?

**A:** Get the vaccine. Be safe. Help us get back to normal. And start enjoying the little things that the vaccine allows us to do.

## Please stay in touch!

Call us: 800-775-2167 Email us: [sjlife@stjude.org](mailto:sjlife@stjude.org)

Visit our website: [www.stjude.org/sjlife-participate](http://www.stjude.org/sjlife-participate)

**Q:** Are COVID vaccines safe for survivors who are on medicines that lower immune system function?

**A:** Vaccines are safe but may not work as well in stimulating an immune response against the virus. That is why the FDA recently recommended a third vaccine dose for individuals on these medicines.

**Q:** Could COVID vaccines change a person's DNA or RNA?

**A:** COVID vaccines do not change or interact with your DNA or RNA in any way. There is no way these vaccines can change your cells or genes.



# HPV vaccination is cancer prevention

Through research, we now know that some cancers are caused by specific types of viruses. Human papillomavirus (referred to as HPV) is a group of viruses that have been identified to cause cancer.

HPV has not been found to cause cancer in children but has been linked to cancers in adults, like cervical cancer in women and throat cancer in men.

HPV cancers are caused by chronic infection with HPV. Eighty-five percent of people will get an HPV infection in their lifetime, and in most, the body's immune system will clear the infection. When HPV stays in the body for many years, over time, an HPV cancer may occur. It is not known why some people get cancer after an HPV infection and others do not.

The good news is that there is a safe and effective vaccine that can prevent infection with HPV and reduce the risk of HPV-related cancers. The HPV vaccine prevents more than 90% of HPV-related cancers—about 36,000 cancers per year in the United States! This is important because an estimated 80 million Americans are infected with HPV.

## CDC's HPV immunization recommendations

- Routine vaccination between ages 9–12 for boys and girls. Completing 2 doses by the 13th birthday gives the greatest protection.
- Catch-up HPV vaccination through age 26 for those not fully vaccinated.
- For adults 27 through 45, discuss HPV vaccination with your doctor, as some people might still benefit.



Program Director Heather Brandt, PhD (left), and Administrative Director Andrea Stubbs (right).

HPV vaccination is part of the recommended childhood vaccinations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advise beginning HPV vaccinations between the ages 9 and 12 for both boys and girls. There is an advantage of giving the vaccination during childhood, because the immune response to the vaccine is better.

For individuals who did not receive HPV vaccination during childhood, catch-up HPV vaccinations are recommended through age 26. Even some adults between the ages of 27 and 45 may still benefit from HPV vaccination.

HPV vaccination rates have been greatly affected during the pandemic. In adolescents, HPV vaccination rates fell by 75% and still remain low. Many older adolescents and young adults are not aware that HPV vaccination is recommended for them. Before the pandemic, HPV vaccination rates were 40% lower in survivors of childhood cancer than the general population.

As you move to get back on track with preventive healthcare measures, be sure to discuss this important cancer prevention vaccine with your healthcare provider. HPV vaccination

is especially important for childhood cancer survivors who may have low immune system function who may not be able to clear the HPV infection.

## A new program at St. Jude

A year-old program at St. Jude is based on a simple question: What if you could prevent some cancers with a safe, effective shot? The HPV vaccine prevents infection with HPV strains that have been linked to cancer. Recognizing that HPV vaccination rates are well below recommended rates, St. Jude launched a program in July 2020 to promote HPV cancer prevention through vaccination. In this effort, St. Jude is partnering with other cancer centers, hospitals, and community groups to organize and carry out programs focused on HPV cancer prevention. "This is an important addition to the lifesaving work of St. Jude," says Dr. Heather Brandt, program director. "Childhood cancers cannot be prevented, but we can prevent those adult cancers that are caused by HPV. Our program's goal is to spread the word about this readily available method of cancer prevention."

## from the study team cont. from page 1

Prevention Program, tells us more about this cancer prevention vaccine and why HPV vaccination is so important for childhood cancer survivors.

Also, SJLife Clinical Director Dr. Tim Folse reminds us that vaccinations are not just for children and adolescents. He reviews vaccinations recommended for older adults and provides resources to help you understand the recommendations, and ways to access and pay for vaccinations.

SJLife research is also trying to get back on track. Over the last year, we limited our research

to remotely delivered programs. We are happy to report that we are now beginning to invite survivors back to Memphis for SJLife evaluations. To assure the safety of participants and that of St. Jude patients receiving therapy, the rollout of invitations will be slow in these early months.

As always, thank you for your support of the SJLife study. We look forward to hearing your feedback about this issue and your suggestions for future topics. Call us at 800-775-2167 or email us at [sjlife@stjude.org](mailto:sjlife@stjude.org).

## Pandemic catch-up cont. from page 1

this missed care will have a negative impact on long-term health.

Heather Brandt, PhD, director of the newly established HPV Cancer Prevention Program at St. Jude, says, “We know that preventive care was delayed, quite frankly,

Parents and others are doing the best they can, in the absence of a supportive system, in many cases.”

**Adolescent immunizations.** There have been large drops in yearly adolescent well visits and immunizations during the

pandemic. Adolescents are up to 20% behind pre-pandemic vaccination rates, leaving them susceptible to vaccine-preventable illnesses, such as meningitis, human papillomavirus (HPV) and associated cancers (see the article on page 3 for more information), and measles.

This is a major concern, says Brandt, because in

communities where rates dip below herd immunity levels, there is a risk for outbreaks of preventable diseases.

With many parents wanting their kids to return to school safely, this is a great time to get the whole family caught up on vaccines that were missed over the last year.

**Older adults need vaccines, too.** For adult childhood cancer survivors, routine vaccines are an especially important form of preventive care, says Tim Folse, MD, staff physician and clinical director for the SJLife Study. “Survivors are one of the groups who need vaccines the most for protection against serious diseases,” says Folse.

In addition to vaccines that prevent shingles and pneumonia, flu shots are also

important. A yearly flu shot is recommended for all adults, including adults treated for childhood cancer. And during the pandemic, adult vaccine demand declined on average more than 60%.

**Knowledge gap.** A related concern for adults is that we all think we’re more vaccinated than we actually are. Folse cites the statistic that while 81% of adults recently said they thought they were up to date on their immunizations, in fact only 50% of them are.

**Better to prevent than treat.** “Immunizations for older adults are an important part of your healthcare,” says Folse. “It is better to prevent disease than to treat it!” Folse acknowledges that doctor’s visits can be busy, and immunizations may not be top of mind for adults or their providers. But he encourages all adult survivors to ask their doctors about immunizations they may need. You don’t even have to go to a doctor’s office to get vaccinations—pharmacies, health departments, and other locations may be options.

“Decades of use has shown that vaccinations are effective in preventing or reducing the impact of many diseases. Vaccinations give your immune system a head start to fight these diseases earlier, as soon as you’re exposed,” says Folse.

### Resources

[www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/index.html) (provides CDC vaccine schedules for all ages)

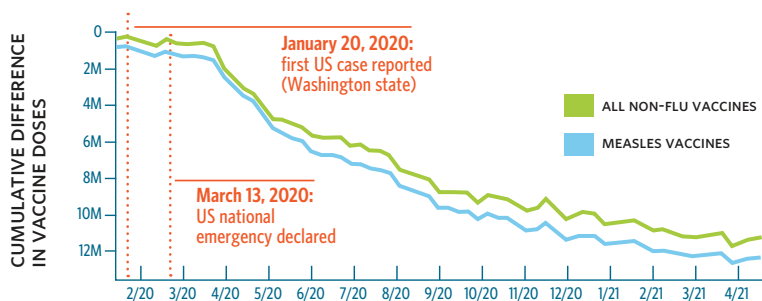
[www.cdc.gov/flu/vaccines-work/vaccineeffect.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/vaccines-work/vaccineeffect.htm) (explains how flu vaccines work)

[www.needy meds.org/](http://www.needy meds.org/) (click “Healthcare Savings” for information about medications and low-cost clinics that give vaccinations)

[www.naccho.org/membership/lhd-directory](http://www.naccho.org/membership/lhd-directory) (directory of local health departments that may offer free vaccinations)

## Vaccinations during the pandemic

Comparison of weekly vaccinations from fiscal year 2019 to fiscal years 2020 and 2021: All non-flu and measles vaccines



Source: Association of Immunization Managers Back to School/Catch-up Immunization Webinar, 4-28-21. Melinda Wharton, MD, MPH, Director, Immunization Services Division, National Center for Immunization & Respiratory Diseases

out of necessity. Our basic needs like food, water, and shelter need to be met before we can think of luxuries like preventive care.

## Covering costs

Did you know that Medicare, Medicaid, and most health insurance cover the cost of immunizations? And a federal Vaccines For Children Program covers all routine vaccines at no cost to uninsured and under-insured children and adolescents. Most health departments also offer free immunizations.

LIFeline

SJLife  
St. Jude Lifetime  
Cohort Study

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