

Immunization Alert expands to include kids through age 14

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Oregon's Immunization ALERT, the statewide immunization information system administered by the Oregon Department of Human Services, nearly doubled its capacity this month for providing information on the immunization status of Oregon children.

ALERT consolidates immunization records for Oregon children to allow health care providers and other authorized users access to a child's complete immunization history and status.

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Previously, ALERT provided immunization forecasting -- information on shots that are due or past due -- for Oregon children up to age 8, which covered approximately 700,000 children. This month, it expanded to provide forecasting information through age 14, or more than 1,170,000 children.

"Childhood immunizations are among the great public health achievements of the past century and are a primary tool for protecting children from vaccine-preventable disease," said Lorraine Duncan, immunization manager in the DHS Public Health Division. "Yet Oregon's immunization rates are too low. ALERT was developed as a tool to help improve those rates."

Only 65 percent of Oregon children age 2 and under are fully immunized, according to a survey of 2005 childhood immunization rates conducted by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nationally, 76 percent of children age 2 and under are fully immunized.

Duncan said most children receive immunizations from more than one provider, which means their records are often scattered. And immunization recommendations frequently change. As a result, too many children miss shots and are not adequately protected against infectious disease. Or, sometimes they receive duplicate shots.

This is where ALERT can help, Duncan noted. It collects immunization data and links records from health care providers, which creates a consolidated record for each child. This allows providers to access a child's complete immunization history to see if a child is missing shots or is due for more.

Schools and child care facilities also use ALERT to check records to avoid sending children home from school when they can't show they have received required immunizations. For example, Duncan noted, ALERT is widely used by school officials every February as part of school exclusion day, when students must provide a record of their shots.

ALERT became operational 10 years ago. In 2001, its information was put on a secure Web site that provides 24-hour access to its 4,120 authorized users. ALERT averages more than 22,000 successful searches each month. Last August, staff celebrated a milestone -- the system responded to its one-millionth search request. Users also can check records during regular business hours via a toll-free customer service line, fax or e-mail.

This month's expansion also added three new vaccines to the list of those it tracks -- rotavirus, Tdap and meningococcal, all newly recommended by the national Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, an expert panel that advises the federal government on the most effective means to prevent vaccine-preventable diseases.

Parents can obtain a copy of their child's immunization record from ALERT by calling 1-800-980-9431. Before releasing a record, ALERT will require a signed agreement that the requestor is the legal parent or guardian of the child. ALERT also will forward a copy of the immunization record to a health care provider, school or child care facility if requested.

"ALERT is an example of what can be achieved through collaboration," Duncan said. "It grew from a valuable partnership among health plans, hospital systems and the DHS Division of Medical Assistance Programs."

Oregon Immunization ALERT is one of many public health programs within DHS that focus on prevention and helping people manage their health so they can be as productive and healthy as possible. More information on ALERT is on the Web at www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/imm/alert/index.shtml.

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