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New vaccines added to childhood immunization program

Saskatchewan children will soon receive further protection from disease with the introduction of three new vaccines to the province's preschool and school age immunization program.

Meningococcal, Varicella (chickenpox) and Pneumococcal vaccines will be phased into the routine publicly funded immunization program over a six-month period, beginning this fall. Meningococcal vaccine prevents bloodstream and brain infections due to meningococcal bacteria. Varicella vaccine prevents chickenpox and complications arising from chickenpox. Pneumococcal vaccine prevents infections from pneumococcal bacteria that can cause bloodstream and middle ear infections, meningitis and pneumonia.

"These three vaccines are recommended as universal childhood vaccines by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI)," said Health Minister John Nilson. "Saskatchewan is pleased to now include them in our publicly funded childhood immunization program."

Funding for the new vaccines is supported by a one-time, three-year \$300 million national immunization fund announced in the recent federal budget. Distribution to provinces is on a per-capita basis; Saskatchewan's share equals \$9.26 million. Following the first year, the new vaccines will cost the province approximately \$4 million per year.

"Immunization is one of the most important and effective ways to prevent disease," said Dr. Ross Findlater, Saskatchewan's Chief Medical Health Officer. "Adding these new vaccines is a positive step in improving the health of our children and families."

The new vaccines will be given at the same time as current routine vaccinations, and only at certain ages for each vaccine. For example, Meningococcal immunization will start this October for children aged 12 months, 4 years, and children in grade six. Varicella immunization will start in January 2005 for children aged 12 months and children in grade six. Pneumococcal immunization will start in April 2005 for infants aged two months. More detailed announcements will be made at the time the new programs begin.

For more information, contact:

Mark Rathwell

Communications Branch

Saskatchewan Health

Regina

Phone: (306) 787-4083