HealthyWomen is submitting this written comment to the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) to request that it make recommendations for the next class of pneumococcal vaccines as soon as possible. Similar to a statement it issued in July, joining other health leaders in calling for such action, it is now even more imperative. After nearly two years of intense focus on lung health resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, it’s critical that the new FDA-approved pneumonia vaccines — Pfizer’s PCV20 and Merck’s V114 (PCV15) — are made available to the public as quickly as possible.

Founded in 1988, HealthyWomen is the nation’s leading nonprofit women’s health information source dedicated to educating and empowering women ages 35-64 to make informed decisions about their health care. Throughout the years, we have educated healthcare consumers and providers about advances in women’s health, from the latest information on diseases and conditions to various milestones pertaining to access to care. We ensure that women have accurate, balanced, evidence-based information so they can participate in shared decision-making with their healthcare providers. We also educate our audience regarding innovations in research and science as well as changes in policy that affect women’s access to treatment and care so that women are prepared to self-advocate for better health outcomes.

Pneumococcal disease is serious, and prevention needs to be a priority. An estimated 1 million adults seek hospital-based care for pneumonia in the United States each year, and 50,000 die. The risk of developing pneumonia increases with age, as does resultant mortality. In a 20-year study, the mortality rate for adults over the age of 80 was 30.8%, as compared to 20.3% for the overall population.

Fall is here, and with its arrival starts the flu and pneumonia season. Ideally it would be better to get the new, more effective pneumococcal vaccines that cover more pneumococcal variants into the arms of vulnerable Americans, particularly the elderly.

Pneumococcal vaccines are critically important for adults over 50, particularly those 65 and older, and especially women — because even though more men get pneumonia, more women die from it. However, despite evidence that pneumococcal vaccines are 60% to 70% effective in preventing invasive disease in older adults and are even more effective in older women, only 68.9% of adults over 65 got vaccinated in 2018. These low vaccination rates are caused by a lack of understanding and vaccine hesitancy.
People of color get sick from pneumococcal disease at higher rates than whites, yet they are less likely to get vaccinated. While 72.5% of non-Hispanic white adults over age 65 received a pneumococcal vaccine in 2018, only 59.5% of older Black adults and 54.1% of older Hispanic adults did. Disparities are also evident across social determinants, income and education, as research has shown that adults with a lower level of education and household income are less likely to get vaccinated against flu.

Even before all the challenges of getting Americans vaccinated with the COVID-19 vaccines, vaccine hesitancy was associated with perceptions of racial discrimination. Non-whites are less likely to get a flu vaccine even if they visit a healthcare provider during influenza (flu) season. In fact, Non-Hispanic white adults were more likely than non-whites to get the flu vaccine in the 2018-2019 season by a margin of 5 to 11 percentage points.

To help address vaccine hesitancy and misinformation, we ask that ACIP provide clear and concise recommendations on these new pneumococcal vaccines. It is our hope that providing clear recommendations and guidelines that provide education on the importance, value and science of the vaccines, will help efforts to encourage people to get important regular life-saving vaccines.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. If you have any questions with respect to our comment, please contact Martha Nolan, J.D., Senior Policy Advisor at martha@healthywomen.org.

Sincerely,

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