Many Parents Unlikely to Seek COVID-19 Vaccination for Newly Eligible Young Children, Survey Finds

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A new survey of parents of children younger than 5 years who are now eligible to receive COVID-19 vaccination in the US finds that vaccine uptake in this age group is likely to be low, with more than 4 in 10 respondents saying they will “definitely not” have these young children vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended on June 18 that all children 6 months through 5 years of age be vaccinated to prevent COVID-19, acting 1 day after the US Food and Drug Administration authorized emergency use of 2 COVID-19 vaccines in this age group.

The move expanded eligibility for COVID-19 vaccination to nearly 20 million additional US children.

The new COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor survey—the most recent in a series from KFF (Kaiser Family Foundation) researchers—included a representative sample of 1847 adults and was conducted from July 7 to July 17 via telephone and the internet.

The survey found that 43% of parents said they would “definitely not” get their children younger than 5 years vaccinated, and 13% would do so only if required for school or childcare. The share of parents opposed to vaccination in this age group has generally increased over the previous year, reflected in earlier KFF surveys that asked parents about vaccinating their child once a COVID-19 vaccine was authorized and available for this age group.

Findings from the new survey, published last week, also revealed that 7% of parents of children younger than 5 years said they had already had their child vaccinated, and 10% said they planned to get their child vaccinated right away. An additional 27% said they would “wait and see” how other children fare after vaccination before making a decision.

Parents who expressed reluctance to have their child vaccinated most commonly cited concerns over the vaccine’s “newness” and “not enough testing” (19%), worries about possible adverse effects (14%), and concerns about the vaccine’s overall safety (13%). In addition, some parents (11%) said that they do not think their child needs the vaccine or that they are not worried about illness from COVID-19.

The survey responses revealed a partisan divide in parents’ beliefs about COVID-19 vaccination for this age group. Those who responded that they would “definitely not” vaccinate a child younger than 5 years were more likely to be Republicans or Republican-leaning (64%, vs 21% of Democrats or Democrat-leaning). Overall, a slight majority (53%) of parents of vaccine-eligible children younger than 5 years reported viewing the vaccine as a greater risk to their child’s health than that posed by COVID-19, but Republican or Republican-leaning parents were substantially more likely to hold this view (73% vs 29% of Democrats or Democrat-leaning).

“Similarly, nearly two-thirds of parents who are unvaccinated say they will ‘definitely not’ get their newly eligible child under the age of 5 vaccinated for COVID-19,” the KFF researchers said. “Notably, even among parents who are vaccinated themselves, about one in four (27%) say they will ‘definitely not’ get their young child vaccinated.”

In addition, parental reservations about vaccinating children younger than 5 years differed by racial and ethnic groups, with access to health care playing a notable role in such concerns. About 44% of Black parents with unvaccinated children in this age group said they were concerned about needing to take time off work to get their child vaccinated or to provide care if the child experienced adverse effects, vs 28% of Hispanic parents and 18% of White parents. Among Hispanic parents of

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unvaccinated young children, 45% reported concerns that "they won't be able to get the vaccine for their child from a place they trust" (compared with 28% of Black parents and 15% of White parents).

There were also disparities in concerns about an out-of-pocket cost for the vaccine, with 36% of Hispanic parents and 27% of Black parents worried about such an expense, compared with 13% of White parents.

Most parents of children aged 6 months through 4 years (70%) say they had not spoken to their pediatrician or other clinician about the COVID-19 vaccination for their child. However, those with higher household incomes ($90 000 or higher) were more likely than those with lower household incomes to report having done so.

Among parents who were considering getting their young child vaccinated, only 27% said they would make a specific appointment with their pediatrician to discuss the issue, with most (70%) saying they would wait until their child's regular checkup to do so.

The authors noted that "pediatricians have an opportunity to provide information and guidance to parents who have concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine—especially at a child's regular check-up appointments"—and that guidance communicated during such encounters may slowly increase vaccine uptake among this group.

KFF researchers found in a separate study of US vaccination data that COVID-19 vaccination of children younger than 5 years had already peaked on July 1—only about 2 weeks after approval.

Only about 544 000 children younger than 5 years (2.8% of the approximately 19 million children in this age group) received at least 1 dose of COVID-19 vaccine in the month following vaccine approval on June 18. In contrast, more than 5.3 million children aged 5 years through 11 years (18.5% of this age group) had received their first dose at a similar point after vaccine approval for that age group.