



Chicken Pox Crops Up in Lamorinda Schools – Time for Booster Shots

By Chris Lavin

Doctors are finding that the chicken pox vaccine, which began to be administered in 1995, is only 70 to 90 percent effective, causing handfuls of children in the area to miss a significant amount of school this spring.

“It is the time of year for weeds and the chicken pox,” said Susan Farley, a public health nurse with the Contra Costa Department of Health. While getting the full-blown disease provides a life-time immunity, parents who have had their children vaccinated sometimes believe they are totally immune, Farley said. “You can get it again. Booster shots up your protection.”

Dr. Daniel Robbins, of Lamorinda Pediatrics in Lafayette, strongly recommends that every child be vaccinated, but if a parent does not want a child to receive chicken pox, he tells them to make sure they vaccinate before the child gets too old if he does not receive the disease naturally. “The disease is much worse in older kids,” Robbins said. He also recommends booster shots for children who have already re-

ceived the vaccine.

At Canyon School, six children have contracted the disease, making that 10 percent of the student population to miss up to two weeks of school, said Gloria Faircloth, school superintendent.

Most schools will send notices to parents when an outbreak occurs. “When we know it’s currently contagious, we put up a sign,” Faircloth said. “This is not a cold.”

The good side of the story is that once a child is immunized against chicken pox, the case is not nearly so severe as when it’s contracted naturally. With an immunized child, he or she will break out in a mild rash that itches for a couple of days, but remains highly contagious to other children until all the spots are covered with scabs. A child who has not been immunized will get a fever, a heavier coverage of spots, and remain contagious for up to 28 days. “It’s ten times worse than someone who has received the vaccine,” Robbins said.

In both cases, even when the pox seems to be on the wane, new spots can emerge.

“Some kids come back to school and get new spots,” Faircloth said – so it’s back to home.

The bad news is that a case of chicken pox can lead to shingles, a painful skin disease caused by the same contagion as chicken pox, a herpes virus called varicella-zoster. Elderly people are more prone to contract shingles, Robbins said, and can suffer from it for years.

“Shingles can be worse than chicken pox,” Robbins said. “We’re still learning what will prevent it (the vaccine) from becoming an adult disease.”

Robbins says some parents do not recognize how life-saving immunizations can be. “Measles vaccines are saving thousand and thousands of lives,” said Robbins, who does much of his work in Zimbabwe working with children with AIDS and disease-prevention programs. He calls the recent trend for parents not to immunize their children a horrible mistake. “It’s the naïvete of living in a well-developed country,” he said.