

St. Luke's Begins Vaccinating Youths Ages 12-15

By Sam Kenned

BETHLEHEM - St. Luke's University Health Network (SLUHN) will begin providing COVID-19 protection to young adolescents, ages 12-15, using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. The FDA and CDC granted emergency use authorization (EUA) for this vaccine in this age group, meaning they can potentially become vaccinated against the virus before summer. This vaccine is the first and, thus far, the only COVID vaccine approved for this age group.

Beginning today, St. Luke's will be offering this safe and effective two-shot protection to children, through the same processes that are currently being used for vaccinating adults against COVID.

Schedule through your primary care provider and/or pediatrician's office.

Call 1-866-STLUKES (785-8537), option 7.

Text VACCINE to 23762 and following the prompts to select your location and date.

Log into or create a St. Luke's MyChart account to self-schedule a vaccine appointment. Individuals ages 13+ are able to register for their own St. Luke's MyChart account and are able to schedule themselves. Individuals who are 12 years old will need a parent to create an account or schedule on their behalf.

Individuals 12-17 will need a parent or guardian to complete the Minor Consent Form. Forms will be available at the vaccine locations.

St. Luke's offers five Pfizer vaccine locations: Bethlehem Campus, Anderson Campus, Monroe Campus, Upper Bucks Campus and Geisinger St. Luke's.

"This FDA authorization is great news for protecting these children, their families, schools and neighborhoods against this dangerous virus," says St. Luke's Chief of Pediatrics Jennifer Janco, MD. "There's a sense of urgency in getting this group vaccinated against COVID, as camp, sports and other summer activities will soon be starting." Children could contract the virus from other infected individuals during these activities, which can impact not only them and their friends, but also their family members, some of whom may be elderly.

The makeup of this two-shot, Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine is the same for these adolescents as for pre-adults and adults, ages 16 and up, which has been given to millions of Americans since December. A recent research study of the vaccine, conducted by Pfizer-BioNTech, concluded it is safe and 100 percent effective in protecting adolescents in the 12-15-year-old group against the virus, Dr. Janco explains.

Getting shots into arms of these youths quickly will help move the United States towards herd immunity, protecting the country against the illness that has sickened 27 million Americans so far—nearly four million of them children-- and claimed the lives of more than 500,000 people in this country. Nearly 300 young people have died of the virus.

"The availability of this targeted vaccine comes at a critical time with summer about six weeks away and with children representing an increasing number of new cases at 22.4 percent in the last week alone," adds Dr. Janco

"It takes a total of five weeks for someone to reach COVID immunity. After getting the first shot, the recipient must wait three weeks for the second one. And after this shot, a person isn't considered fully immune until two weeks later."

Timing is critical, as children and parents prepare for various social, group activities like athletics, vacations and, in a few months, a return to school, all of which raise risks for virus transmission, adds Dr. Janco. She has been receiving inquiries from parents looking for the vaccine for their children, which is encouraging.

"Now we have a proven safe and effective vaccine for their children ages 12-15. There really is no reason now to not get kids vaccinated."

St. Luke's is closely following the developments by Moderna and Pfizer BioNTech as they test vaccines to protect kids ages six months to 11 years.

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