

# October has been designated 'Child Health Month'

By Kit Almy

To raise a child to be healthy in every respect, start from the beginning and provide a combination of good nutrition and healthy habits, a safe environment, immunizations and regular doctor visits.

From infancy on, children should visit the doctor regularly, not only for medical check-ups and immunizations, but also for guidance (both for the child and the parents) about all sorts of health and life issues.

"We see babies in the hospital when they're first born and every day while they're in the hospital. Then two days after they're home, then again at two weeks of age to make sure their weight gain is normal," said Dr. Padma Reddy, of Bronson Rambling Road Pediatrics, 5629 Stadium Drive.

Kids should have checkups at two, four, six, and nine months; one year; 15 to 18 months; two years; and annually after that.

At each visit the doctor takes a family history to look for risk factors, measure developmental progress, and assess the child's overall health, said Dr. Sandra Wiederhold, of ProMed Physicians, 8450 N. 32nd Street in Richland.

One advantage of these regular visits is that, "We can catch previously undiagnosed medical conditions and, early on, congenital conditions like congenital hip dislocation," she said. "That sort of thing is best picked up with frequent exams in the first months."

At an early age, all children receive routine tests and immunizations. Newborns get a statewide screening for preventable diseases such as sickle cell disease, hypothyroidism and others, said Reddy.

"At nine or 12 months we examine them for lead levels," she added. The screening

process includes a family history to determine if the child may have had exposure to lead-based paint, as well as a blood test.

"At every physical we give some combination of vaccinations," she said. "We try to get most immunizations done as soon as possible." The first immunization is given at birth against Hepatitis B and they continue, beginning at two months of age.

A common fear is that the immunization process is traumatic and even dangerous for children, but Reddy dismisses this. "Early vaccination is important because, before age two, babies don't remember the process and don't develop a fear of shots," she said.

"There has been so much safety research that has found that giving multiple shots at one time doesn't increase pain or cause children to be susceptible to infection or autism."

As children grow up, physicians will keep track of the family health history and monitor for diseases and problems like diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease.

"The most common chronic childhood disease we see is asthma, and it is increasingly common," said Wiederhold. Different causes are attributed to the increase, including air pollution and second-hand smoke.

"Some are concerned that kids have too hygienic an environment and that that's



related to asthma," she said, adding, "they need to eat more dirt!"

Pediatricians call these regular check-ups "well child visits" because the focus is on preventive medicine. "We don't want to just fix what's broken later," said Reddy, so pediatricians counsel parents and children about healthy habits, including diet, exercise and safety.

Nutrition is important throughout life and, for babies, physicians recommend

the benefits of breast feeding. They also counsel parents on offering solid foods at around six months and on maintaining a varied diet with adequate iron in the second half of the first year, said Wiederhold.

Children need to learn about healthy eating themselves. "It's really an American tragedy that there's so much obesity," said Reddy. "We try to teach children what's healthy and what's not, without getting too concerned about weight," - a necessary caution due to the prevalence of anorexia in girls as well as boys.

Regular exercise is also important. "Avoid letting kids sit and watch TV and play video games all day," said Wiederhold. Citing the link between violent behavior in teens to violent video games, she recommends, "increasing the time kids spend reading or being active."

In addition, families should prevent accidents by practicing safety in and around the house, especially in the kitchen, around poisonous

substances and around the swimming pool.

Major child safety issues include car seat and bicycle helmet use. "Keep infants in rear-facing seats until they are at least one year of age and 20 pounds," said Reddy.

Kids should always be in the back seat and should stay in a car seat until about the age of four, then move to a booster

seat until anywhere between eight and 12 years.

Kids should begin wearing a bike helmet early, as early as age three, she said, so that it becomes part of the whole bike-riding process. "When you get into a habit (of not wearing a helmet), it's too late."

Educating families on these safety and prevention issues is just part of the expanding role of pediatricians.

Wiederhold said she's seen a new trend in pediatric studies in the 20 years she's been practicing. "It's something called 'the new morbidity.' It used to be just the study of childhood diseases.

"It now encompasses psychosocial issues, adjustment disorders, unusual fears (September 11 has had an impact on children), drug exposure, peer pressure, as well as learning disabilities and ADD, which have always been out there, but are just better diagnosed now," she said.

Many of these more social issues apply directly to the health issues of adolescents. Wiederhold said doctors watch for warning signs of eating disorders and look at risky behaviors, such as smoking, drug and alcohol use and promiscuity. They also talk with teens confidentially about abstinence and birth control.

"We counsel teens to talk with their (parents) about (their sexual activity), but sometimes they really don't want to and we have to respect that," she said.

"We try to form a bond and really establish a good patient-doctor relationship, which is so essential for teens, because they often keep a lot inside," said Reddy.

Reddy added that doctors can provide advice, support and reassurance to parents on all sorts of child-raising issues. For example, "It's normal for two-year-olds to be throwing tantrums, and you might think you'll know what to do, but it's nice to talk about that with your primary care provider."