Eldercare Q&A January, 2017

The Importance of Vaccines For The Elderly

Q: Is it important for seniors to keep up on their vaccines?

A: Yes. A number of diseases which can be prevented with vaccines can cause significant illness, hospitalization, disability, and even death.

Older adults are more affected than most people by these diseases. According to the Alliance for Aging Research, more than half of the annual flu-related hospitalizations, and 90% of the annual flu deaths, are in people age 65 or over. Roughly half of the 1 million annual cases of shingles in the U.S. are in people over the age of 60. Even though seniors are hit harder by these illnesses, vaccination rates among the elderly are low.

Your immune system is made up of cells that defend your body against a bacteria or virus, called a pathogen. It is your immune system which produces antibodies that destroy the pathogens. Every time your immune system reacts to a specific pathogen, it builds up a defense called immunity. The next time that pathogen shows up, your immune system "knows" the bacteria or virus, and removes it more quickly.

Vaccines imitate an infection, and tell your immune system to produce antibodies to protect you from a disease. By getting vaccinated, you also protect those around you who may not be vaccinated. This is called herd or "community immunity." The more people who get vaccinated, the fewer chances a disease has to spread.

Here are bacteria or viruses that can be treated with vaccines:

- **Influenza** (flu) is a respiratory virus that spreads through droplets from coughing or sneezing that land on you. Every year as many as 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu.
- **Tetanus** is a bacteria that enters the body through a deep flash wound. It can interfere with the ability to breathe.
- **Diphtheria** is a bacteria that attaches to the lining of the respiratory system and produces toxins. It can make it hard to breathe and swallow. This can lead to infections of the lung, blood, heart, kidney, and nerves.
- **Pertussis** can lead to uncontrollable coughing, which often makes it harder to breathe.
- **Varicella** is the chicken pox virus. Varicella zoster is a chicken pox virus that can be reactivated years later as a shingles infection. During their lifetime, 30% of Americans will develop shingles — around 1 million people each year.
- **Pneumonia** is bacteria or virus that infects the lungs. Every year, an estimated 53,000 people die and 1.1 million are hospitalized because of pneumonia.

Vaccines you got when you were younger (tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis) can wear off, so you may need a booster. If there are vaccines you never got as a child (like chickenpox), it may be recommended that you get them as an adult.

As we age our immune system weakens and puts us at higher risk for certain diseases, like shingles and pneumonia. After age 60 there are additional vaccines that are recommended. Vaccines for measles, mumps, and rubella are not recommended for ages 60 and up.

Talk to your doctor about staying up-to-date with your vaccines. The flu vaccine can change each season and even change mid-season. Your immunity decreases over the year. Certain diseases and conditions can make it harder to fight off infection. With some chronic diseases, the complications of infection can be more severe. Ask about your risk for meningitis, hepatitis A & B.

Whenever you get vaccinated, ask for an immunization record card, and have it sent to your doctor's office. Medicare Part B pays for flu, pneumonia, and hepatitis B vaccines. Medicare Part D plans must include all commercially available vaccines (except those covered by Part B). Medicare Part D or Medicare Advantage Part C plans that offer prescription drug coverage may also cover a number of these vaccines. Medicaid covers some of these vaccines.

For more information about what vaccines are recommended for you, go to these webpages: www.cdc.gov/vaccines
www.agingresearch.org/vaccinekit.