

Seniors & The Flu: Do I Need A Shot?

Q: Do I really need to get a flu shot this season?

A: Nine out of ten flu-related deaths are people age 65 and over. Six out of ten people who are hospitalized for flu-related problems are older adults. Last year, 215,000 seniors who got the flu were hospitalized from it. The flu is especially dangerous for people with chronic conditions, like heart or pulmonary disease, or diabetes. It's harder for seniors to fight disease, because their immune system weakens with age.

Influenza is easy to catch: it's passed from person to person through coughing, sneezing, or contact with fluids from an infected person's mouth or nose. You should take preventive measures—like washing your hands often, staying away from people who are sick, and encouraging others to cover their coughs. But an annual vaccination is still the best way to prevent the flu. As an added bonus---if you get a flu shot, it helps protect your family and everyone around you. Anyone who is around someone with a chronic condition should get a flu shot, and grandparents who care for grandchildren should get a flu shot too. Do it for others, if not for yourself.

There is a flu vaccine made specifically for people age 65 and older. It improves the body's production of antibody against the flu. This higher-dose vaccine contains four times the antigen compared with the traditional, standard-dose vaccine. Antibodies help your immune system protect you against infection when exposed to the virus. Most people have minimal or no side effects after receiving the higher-dose vaccine. The most common side effects include swelling, or redness at the injection site, muscle aches, fatigue, headache, or fever. The higher-dose shot for seniors is available through your doctor, your

workplace clinic, local pharmacies, or other flu shot clinics. Medicare Part B covers the full cost of one flu shot per flu season. You pay nothing for the shot, so be sure to ask in advance if your doctor, clinic or other health care provider accepts Medicare.

Your doctor can explain who should not get a flu shot. Anyone with a severe allergic reaction (e.g., anaphylaxis) to any vaccine component, including eggs, egg products, or to a previous dose of any flu vaccine, should not get a shot. Anyone who has experienced Guillain-Barré syndrome (severe muscle weakness) after a previous flu shot, also should not get a shot. . If you notice any other problems or symptoms after a shot, contact your health care professional immediately.

The flu season usually peaks in January or February, but can continue well into the spring. It takes approximately two weeks following a flu shot to produce a protective immune response. Even if you can't get a flu shot early in the season, it is still recommended that you get a shot into the winter months and beyond.

You need to get a flu shot every year because the flu viruses usually change from season to season, and protection from the vaccine decreases over time. A new vaccine is made each year to protect against the strains that are expected to cause disease. Immunity to flu viruses weakens after a year, so an annual shot is important---even if the same viruses are used in the vaccine.

Keep in mind that the flu shot does not contain the live virus, so it is impossible to get the flu from the shot.

To learn more about the flu, or the special flu vaccine for seniors, go to: <http://ncoa.org/flu>, or www.cdc.gov/Flu .

