

It's Not Too Late To Get A Flu Shot

Q: I haven't had a flu shot yet – is it too late in the season to get one?

A: No. The flu season usually peaks in January or February, and can continue well into the spring. It takes around two weeks following a flu shot to produce a protective immune response, so even if you have not had a flu shot yet—talk to your doctor—because you should get a shot every year. The 2014-2015 flu season recorded the highest hospitalization rates among people 65 years of age and older in recent history.

The National Council on Aging recently released the results of a survey with the drug-maker Sanofi Pasteur to uncover what people over 65 know about the flu and flu prevention. The survey included more than 1,065 older Americans. It found that many seniors underestimate the seriousness of the flu and are largely unaware of their vaccine options. The flu survey found that:

- Only 8% of older adults surveyed are concerned about getting the flu.
- Only 13% are extremely confident in their knowledge of possible flu complications.
- 30% are unaware that someone with chronic conditions like heart disease or diabetes would be at risk for complications from the flu.
- 62% got a flu shot in the past because their physician recommended it.
- 57% are unaware there is a flu shot specifically for older people.

About one-third of people 65 years of age and older are unaware that someone with chronic conditions would be at risk for complications from the flu. Yet influenza hits older adults the hardest. It can be severe and even life-threatening for older adults due to their weakened immune systems, and is especially dangerous for people with chronic conditions like heart disease and diabetes. Up to 80% of adults hospitalized from flu complications in past flu seasons had a chronic health condition.

Many seniors reported that they get vaccinated against the flu every year, and do so because their health care professionals tell them to get a shot:

- 71% of older adults reported getting an annual flu shot to help maintain their health.

- 62% got a flu shot in the past because their physician recommended it.
- 57% are more likely to get a flu shot if their doctor recommended it because of their age.
- 41% got the type of flu shot they did because it was recommended by their physician.

But the survey found that many seniors remain unaware of their flu vaccine options: 65% think most flu shots are appropriate for all age groups. But 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. The higher-dose shot for seniors is available through your doctor, your workplace clinic, local pharmacies, or other flu shot clinics.

Most people have minimal or no side effects after receiving the higher-dose flu vaccine. Your doctor can tell you if you are someone who should not get a flu shot. If you have an adverse reaction, you should contact your physician.

The flu survey concludes that further education and resources are needed when it comes to the flu:

- 92% of survey respondents are not concerned about getting the flu despite seniors' high hospitalization rates.
- 88% of older adults take a proactive approach to their health.
- However, 82% are not extremely confident in their knowledge of the flu and where to get flu information.

Medicare Part B covers the full cost of one flu shot per flu season. You need to get a shot every year because the flu viruses usually change from season to season, and protection from the vaccine decreases over time.

One final fact: The flu shot does not contain live virus, so it is impossible to get the flu from the shot.