

Protect. Learn. Understand. Safeguard.
Educating older adults about influenza and prevention
From the National Council on Aging and Sanofi Pasteur



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Influenza and Vaccination in Older Adults

I'm a healthy older adult who has never had the flu or suffered any serious consequences. Do I still need to worry about catching the disease?

Yes. Anyone can catch the flu, and older adults are at greater risk for influenza and its serious complications. The flu is a common respiratory infection that is easily passed from person to person through coughing and sneezing or through contact with fluids from an infected person's mouth or nose. Many people mistakenly refer to common colds as the flu, but colds are usually milder and generally do not result in the serious health problems that are related to influenza, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalization.

Why are older adults at greater risk of getting the flu?

Despite how healthy or youthful we may appear, as we age, our immune system weakens and our ability to fight illness decreases. As a result, adults 65 years of age and older are more vulnerable to influenza and its related complications, making influenza vaccination extremely important.

How serious is the flu for older adults?

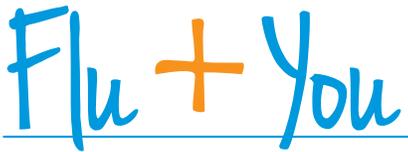
Influenza can be a very serious and potentially life-threatening disease. On average, influenza-related complications lead to 226,000 hospitalizations and anywhere from 3,000 to 49,000 deaths each year in the United States. More than six out of 10 of these hospitalizations and nine out of 10 of these deaths occur in people 65 and older.

What should older adults do to best protect themselves against influenza and its related complications?

Vaccination is the best way to help protect against influenza. Although vaccination is recommended for everyone 6 months of age and older, it is especially important for older adults. Adults 65 and older have options for vaccination to help meet the needs of their age group. It is also helpful to take preventive measures, such as covering coughs, washing hands, and staying away from people who are sick, but these cannot replace vaccination as the best method of protection.

What are my vaccination options?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends annual influenza vaccination for everyone 6 months of age and older. There are vaccine options available for every age group, so it is important to talk to your health care provider about the option that might be best for you. Adults 65 and older have two vaccine options available — the traditional flu shot, as well as a higher dose flu vaccine designed specifically to address the age-related decline of the immune system to trigger a stronger immune response following influenza immunization.



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What is the difference between the traditional and higher dose flu shots?

The higher dose vaccine is designed specifically for adults 65 and older. The body's ability to fight disease declines with age due to a weakening of the immune system, which results in the body producing fewer antibodies to help fight infection from the flu virus. Recent studies have shown that the traditional flu vaccine might not work as well for people 65 years of age and older as it does for younger people because the age-related decline in the immune system also affects the body's response to vaccination.

If the higher dose vaccine has more antigen, does it cause more side effects?

The safety profile of the higher dose vaccine is similar to that of the traditional flu vaccine, although side effects were reported more frequently after vaccination with the higher dose vaccine. The most common side effects experienced during immunization were mild and temporary and included pain, redness, and swelling at the injection site, as well as headache, muscle aches, fever, and malaise. Most people had minimal or no side effects after receiving the higher dose vaccine.

Where can I find more information about the higher dose vaccine?

Talk to your health care provider about which vaccine option is right for you. In addition, you can visit www.cdc.gov/Flu for more information.

Who should not get a flu shot?

Talk to your health care provider before getting a flu shot if you have ever had a severe allergic reaction to eggs, a serious reaction to a previous flu shot, or Guillain-Barré syndrome.

When should I get vaccinated?

You should get your flu shot as soon as vaccine is available in the late summer or early fall. If you don't have a chance to get a flu shot right away, vaccination throughout the influenza season into the winter months and beyond is still recommended and beneficial.

I got the flu shot last year. Do I need to get it again?

Yes. You need to get vaccinated against the flu every year because the types of influenza viruses circulating change annually, which is why a new vaccine is made each year to help protect against the current strains. In addition, immunity to influenza viruses wanes after a year, which makes annual vaccination important.

Is it OK to get a flu shot at a retail store or clinic instead of at my physician's office?

Yes. Influenza vaccines are now widely available at retail stores, pharmacies, workplace flu clinics, and many more places. You should get vaccinated at a place that is most convenient for you.

Can I get influenza from the flu shot?

No. The flu shot does not contain the live virus so it is impossible to get influenza from the vaccine.

Does Medicare cover the cost of the higher dose option?

Yes. Both vaccine options are covered by Medicare Part B with no copay.

Talk to your health care provider today about the dangers of the flu, the benefits of vaccination and the best vaccine option to meet the needs of your age group. To learn more, visit www.ncoa.org/Flu.