

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Immunity BOOST

Experts say flu, pneumonia vaccines essential to fight illnesses

By Encarnacion Pyle

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If you are a senior and haven't gotten your flu and pneumonia shots yet, it's crucial to get vaccinated right away, experts say.

"Older adults are more fragile individuals" and have weaker immune systems that don't fight off infections as easily, said Dr. Mysheika Roberts, Columbus Public Health's assistant commissioner and medical director.

The flu might not seem like a big deal, but not doing anything to prevent it can be a serious mistake, federal health officials say. The flu is responsible for about 226,000 hospitalizations each year and between 3,000 and 49,000 deaths, depending on how severe the strain is every year. Nearly 90 percent of those who die are people 65 and older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

To make matters worse, symptoms in seniors can be more severe and last longer than in younger adults. They also might not be as pronounced at the onset, making an early diagnosis difficult, potentially leading to a more dangerous illness.

The flu, for example, can easily become pneumonia in seniors.

In fact, one-third of all pneumonia cases are caused by respiratory viruses such as influenza, said Dr. Christina Liscynsky, an infectious-disease expert at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center. Other causes include bacteria and, less commonly, fungi or parasites.

Patients with pneumonia often struggle to breathe, as air sacs in the lungs — called alveoli — fill with fluids and pus. They also might feel fatigued, suffer coughing fits and experience aches and chills.

Smokers and people with chronic illness such

as diabetes, lung cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease are particularly at risk, Liscynsky said.

Each year, pneumonia hospitalizes about 1 million people nationwide and kills 50,000, according to the CDC.

Most people get infected through every day social interaction. "In my mind, the highest risk for seniors is grandchildren because of their runny noses," she said.

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Others contract it in health-care facilities.

Experts agree that vaccinations are the best prevention.

Although vaccination rates for children — the other vulnerable population — have steadily risen above 90 percent, the rate for older adults have remained stubbornly flat at 65 percent, according to Kaiser Health News. The federal government's goal is 90 percent by 2020.

"Progress has been barely visible," Dr. Bruce Gellin, the nation's top vaccine official, said at a 2015 briefing in Washington to highlight the problem.

The disparity is even more prominent among older African Americans and Latinos, groups that also are more likely to have pre-existing conditions such as asthma and heart disease that put them at greater risk of severe illness or death from flu or



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pneumonia, according to the American Lung Association.

For best coverage, seniors should get:

- an annual flu shot;
- the two pneumonia vaccines — the Prevnar 13 and Pneumovax 23 vaccines — which prevent bacterial infections in the blood, meningitis and pneumonia;
- and the Tdap vaccine that protects against tetanus, diphtheria and whooping cough.

Though some might be tempted to get only one of the pneumonia vaccines, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that older adults get both because the two work in different ways to offer broader protection. Individuals who have never gotten a pneumonia vaccine should get a dose of the Prevnar 13 first, and then, 12 months later, a dose of Pneumovax 23.

Those 60 and older should also get a vaccination to lower their chances of getting shingles, which can cause rashes all over the face and body and stinging pain that can last for months and sometimes years, Roberts said. A tetanus booster every 10 years is a good idea, too.

So is practicing good health habits such as covering coughs, hand washing, cleaning household surfaces that are touched frequently such as countertops and door knobs, and avoiding people who are sick, Liscynsky said. Sticking to a nutritious diet and getting plenty of exercise also helps prevent illness.

"The goal is to stay healthy and active so you can enjoy life," she said.

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