

Influenza and Other Vaccines Can Save Your Life!

by Kaye Ivanoff, RN

Vaccines play a vital role in the prevention of some potentially deadly diseases. Many in the fifty plus age group remember stories of friends or family members contracting diseases such as Influenza, polio, measles, diphtheria and rubella and being forever disabled or even killed by these devastating diseases. Since 1955 when the Salk polio vaccine was declared “safe, effective and potent”, great strides have been made in reducing and eliminating vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States. Today, there are few reminders of the suffering, disabilities, and premature deaths caused by more than twenty diseases that are now preventable with vaccines.

In the United States, only 25% of all Americans are fully vaccinated, and adults are much more likely to die from vaccine preventable diseases than are children. The reasons for this gap are that many adults do not have a primary care doctor, they may not see their doctor regularly, or they change doctors frequently causing their immunization status to simply fall through the cracks. Many patients in high-risk groups with chronic medical conditions often see several different specialists, with none of them taking primary responsibility for keeping up with immunizations. In addition, many adults mistakenly think vaccines are only for children and therefore never think about vaccine-preventable diseases which may affect them.

In a report by the National Vaccine Program Office (NVPO), the public health burden of vaccine-preventable diseases among adults is stated as follows:
“Approximately 45,000 adults in the United States die annually of complications from influenza, pneumococcal infections, and Hepatitis B—the primary vaccine-preventable diseases affecting adults. Although effective vaccines to prevent these diseases are available, they are widely underutilized.”
(Adult Immunization Action Plan: Report of the Workgroup on Adult Immunization. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, 1998).

Probably the most well-known vaccine recommended today for people of all ages is the Influenza or Flu vaccine. Although the Flu vaccine is recommended for most individuals, including **everyone** aged fifty and older, many people in this age group still refuse to take it. When the Flu vaccine was first developed, it was made using live virus, causing many people to actually get the Flu after taking the vaccine. It is now impossible to get the Flu from the Flu shot because only “killed” or “inactivated” virus is now used to make the vaccine.

People of all ages die each year from complications of having the Flu. But because increasing age and the presence of chronic medical conditions cause our immune systems to be less effective, many of us aged fifty and older are considered to be at the highest risk for death due to complications of the Flu. Beginning with the 2010-2011 flu season, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that **EVERYONE** beginning at age six (6) months receive the influenza vaccine every year. The following groups of people should take priority in receiving the flu vaccine in the event of a vaccine shortage:

- Children aged six months to nineteen years
- Pregnant women
- People fifty years of age and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions

- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- Anyone who desires protection from the seasonal flu
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including:
 - Health care workers
 - Household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
 - Household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than six months of age because these children are too young to be vaccinated.

Because there was such a large number of cases of H1N1 swine flu disease all over the world last year and because it is still considered to be a serious threat to us, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) determined early this spring that the H1N1 virus should be added to the seasonal flu vaccine for the 2010-2011 flu season. Although the number of deaths in the United States from H1N1 swine flu has been nowhere near the number of deaths that occur every year from the seasonal flu, there is heightened awareness of the health risk of this new strain that has jumped from simply animal infection to now being human to human transmission. It is because this is a novel strain that infectious disease specialists are so concerned.

In addition to a yearly Flu shot, many people should consider taking the Pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine. The current vaccine, Pneumovax 23, prevents illness from twenty-three different strains of bacterial pneumonia for the rest of your life if you are healthy and have no other risk factors! It can be given to people of all ages, not just the elderly, although persons aged sixty-five and older and those who reside in nursing homes are among the highest risk. It is also recommended that all persons ages fifty and older, all smokers and people of all ages with asthma take the pneumonia vaccine once before they are age 65 and again after they reach age 65, as long as it has been at least five years. For those with certain health conditions, their physician may recommend taking the Pneumococcal vaccine every five years anyway. If you are unable to get the seasonal flu vaccine in your area, are allergic to eggs or have had Guillain-Barre syndrome, you should take the pneumonia vaccine as directed.

Hepatitis B is a sexually transmitted disease that is drastically on the rise in the fifty and above age group. Many seniors do not think they have to worry about the diseases traditionally associated with the younger age groups, when in reality their risk is much higher. This increased risk is in part due to the advent of Viagra and the fact that many people are engaging in sexual relations with multiple sex partners and are not using protection such as condoms. Just because you think you are past worrying about pregnancy does not mean you have nothing else to worry about! There are more new cases of HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B and other STD's in the fifty plus age group than in many of the other groups. So although many people do not think about these issues, vaccination against Hepatitis B and the practice of safe sex are both very important for all of us, including sexually active seniors.

There are other important vaccines recommended for adults, such as Tetanus/diphtheria, Hepatitis A and Shingles. But the most important vaccines that all seniors should consider are the vaccines for Influenza and Pneumonia. Every adult should talk with their primary care physician to determine the best plan for themselves and each family member for staying healthy and safe from vaccine-preventable diseases.

This article was written by Kaye Ivanoff, RN of SHOTS, etc., a Nashville-based provider of all vaccinations needed by adolescents and adults to stay healthy for work or school requirements, world travel and everyday life. For more information about services available for companies and individuals, please call 615-469-7413 or visit www.SHOTSetc.com. SHOTS, etc. is located at 7648 Hwy 70 So. Ste 15, Nashville, TN 37221.

SHOTS, etc.®