

Essential Vaccination Information for Older Adults

Some factors that affect your health are outside of your control. However, many important risk factors are within your power to change. This includes getting shots, called vaccinations, that help protect you from certain illnesses. Vaccines are some of the safest therapies around. Although all therapies, including vaccines, pose the rare chance of serious side effects, for most people, the risks from the diseases are far greater than the risks from the vaccines. Contact your health care provider or local health department for a list of doctors who give these shots. Your city or county health department or local hospital may operate clinics that provide these vaccines.

The American Geriatrics Society Health in Aging Foundation recommends the following vaccinations for most older adults.

Flu Shot

WHAT IT DOES

Protects against annual influenza viruses.

WHO NEEDS IT

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend the flu shot for everyone six months of age and older. While everyone should get a flu vaccine, the CDC notes that it is especially important for the following people to get flu shots because they are at high risk for having serious flu-related complications: anyone who is 65 years of age or older; nursing home residents; and people with serious health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma, lung disease or HIV. Caregivers for older adults should also get vaccinated to avoid spreading the flu.

WHO SHOULD NOT GET IT

People who are allergic to eggs, have had allergic reactions to flu shots in the past, or have been diagnosed with Guillian-Barre Syndrome.

WHEN TO GET IT

Because new strains of the flu develop constantly, the flu vaccine must be given yearly. You should get your flu shot as soon as it becomes available in your community, usually in the late summer or early fall.

Pneumococcal Shot

WHAT IT DOES

Protects against pneumococcal bacteria, which can cause pneumonia and blood and brain infections.

WHO NEEDS IT

Anyone 65 years or older.

WHEN TO GET IT

Ask your healthcare provider. Two different types of pneumococcal vaccine are recommended now. They are called pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV)13 and pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPSV)23.

Tetanus/Diphtheria Shot

WHAT IT DOES

Protects against two potentially deadly bacterial infections. A second, and different, form of the vaccine (called “Tdap”) protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (whooping cough).

WHO NEEDS IT

Everyone. It is now recommended to get a one-time dose of the “Tdap” version if you are 65 or older to be protected from whooping cough.

WHEN TO GET IT

Once every 10 years.

Shingles (Herpes Zoster) Shot

WHAT IT DOES

Protects against the development of shingles—outbreaks of sometimes intensely painful rashes or blisters on the skin—reducing the risk by 51%. Protects against the development of chronic pain from shingles (also called postherpetic neuralgia), reducing the risk by 66%.

WHO NEEDS IT

The CDC recommends this vaccine for adults 60 years of age and older.

WHO SHOULD NOT GET IT

People who have active tuberculosis or problems with their immune system, such as leukemia, lymphoma, other malignant diseases involving the bone marrow or lymph system, or HIV infection, as well as those taking drugs that suppress the immune system.

WHEN TO GET IT

Once.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also recommends additional shots—including the Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR) vaccination, and shots for Varicella, Hepatitis A and B, and Meningococcal disease—for older adults who run an increased risk of these diseases because they have certain health problems, occupations, or lifestyles. Ask your healthcare provider if you should get any of these additional shots.