

Influenza and Pneumonia

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Receiving an influenza vaccination once a year is the best way to prevent the flu. Research studies have shown that the influenza vaccination cuts down on the number of hospitalizations and deaths from influenza in older people.

Q . What is influenza?

A . Influenza (also called the flu) is an infection caused by the influenza virus. There are two types of influenza viruses, influenza A and influenza B, yet both viruses may cause similar symptoms. Influenza usually begins with a sudden fever, chills, sore muscles and a dry cough, as well as a sore throat, headache, weakness and loss of appetite. Some older people may experience confusion when they have the flu. These symptoms usually improve over a few days, but older people may feel weak for a couple of weeks following the illness.

Q . What is pneumonia?

A . Pneumonia is an infection in the lungs that can be quite serious. In some cases, it is caused by the influenza virus, or by another virus, but more often it is caused by a bacterial infection such as *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. Common symptoms of pneumonia caused by bacteria are fever, a cough that brings up phlegm, and trouble breathing. Pneumonia symptoms often set in once a person is recovering from the flu and may be feeling better. Older people with pneumonia may experience confusion, and may not have a fever when they get pneumonia. Usually the pneumonia can be seen on a chest x-ray.

Q . How serious are influenza and pneumonia?

A . Both influenza and pneumonia can be very serious in older people. When an older person has the flu, it may take a couple of weeks or longer to feel better. Influenza can cause pneumonia, either from the influenza virus itself or from a bacteria infection that starts because the person is weakened from influenza. Pneumonia caused by bacteria can be very serious, especially in older people who have other illnesses (such as diabetes, emphysema, heart failure or cancer) that make it harder for their bodies to recover from the pneumonia.

Q . Can I prevent myself from getting influenza and pneumonia?

A . Receiving an influenza vaccination once a year is the best way to prevent the flu. Research studies have shown that the influenza vaccination cuts down on the number of hospitalizations and deaths from influenza in older people. In the US, it is best to get an influenza vaccination a few weeks before the start of the flu season, usually in October. You should still get the vaccination, even if you miss it in October. Prescribed medications that fight the influenza virus may also help prevent influenza when there is an outbreak. Another preventive measure is to avoid close contact with people who have the flu.

The pneumonia vaccination is a different vaccination that helps protect you from *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. It should be given to everyone aged 65 years and older, and people aged 50 and older should get one if they have illnesses that make them more likely to become seriously ill from pneumonia (such as diabetes, emphysema, kidney problems and heart failure).

Q . How often should the influenza and pneumonia vaccinations be repeated?

A . Because the influenza virus changes from year-to-year, you should receive the vaccination each year-usually in the fall-before flu season begins. The pneumonia vaccination (also called pneumococcal vaccine) is generally given once in a person's lifetime, regardless of age; however, if you received your first pneumococcal vaccination before age 65, and if it has been five or more years since that time, a second vaccination should be given.

Q . Do antibiotics help fight influenza and pneumonia?

A . Most regular antibiotics do not help treat influenza; however, there are specific antibiotics that fight the influenza virus. Your health care provider may prescribe these for you if an outbreak of influenza occurs where you live, especially if you live in a nursing home. Pneumonia caused by bacteria is generally treated with an antibiotic. Your health care provider will prescribe the one that best fights the bacteria causing your pneumonia. It is important to take all of the antibiotics prescribed by your health care provider, even if you no longer feel sick. Hospitalization for pneumonia is usually not necessary, so long as you have someone who can look in on you. More serious cases of pneumonia, however, may require hospitalization for treatment with intravenous (IV) antibiotics.

Q . Should I contact my health care provider if I think I have influenza or pneumonia?

A . You should contact your health care provider if you are concerned that you have the flu, or if you do not feel better after a few days. It is better to confront the illness early on, rather than waiting until you become very sick. If you think you have pneumonia, you should contact your health care provider so he or she can decide the best treatment. In particular, you should contact him or her if you have a fever (especially if it is greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit by mouth or if your temperature is two degrees higher or more than usual). But remember that some older people do not have a fever when they get pneumonia, even though they may have a serious infection. You should also contact your health care provider if you are not able to drink liquids because of your illness. You should contact your health care provider right away (or go to an emergency room) if you have shaking chills, trouble breathing or fast breathing, or if you feel confused.

Q . How can I find out more information about influenza and pneumonia?

A . National Coalition for Adult Immunization

4733 Bethesda Avenue, Suite 750

Bethesda, MD 20814-5228

Phone: (301) 656-0003

Fax: (301) 907-0878

adultimm@aol.com

www.medscape.com/NCAI

CDC National Immunization Information Hotline

Phone: (800) 232-2522 (English Service), (800) 232-0233 (Spanish Service)

Monday-Friday 8:00 a.m. - 11:00 p.m. Eastern

TimeNational Institute on Aging

PO Box 8057 n Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

Phone: (800) 222-2225 or (800) 222-4225 (TTY)

www.nih.gov/nia

