

Necessary Vaccines for Older Adults

Getting vaccines to protect you from illness is one of the most important things you can do to stay healthy. Vaccines are often injections, sometimes called “shots.”

Vaccines are very safe. Vaccines can have side effects, but for most people, it is more dangerous to risk getting sick. If you have concerns about vaccine side effects or safety, speak to your healthcare provider.

To get your vaccines, you can contact your healthcare provider. You can also ask your local health department for more information on where to get these vaccines. You also may be able to get vaccines at your local neighborhood pharmacy.

There is a government agency called the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC). The CDC recommends the following vaccines for most older adults.

■ Influenza (Flu) Vaccine

What it does: Protects against serious illness from yearly flu viruses.

Who needs it: All older adults should get a flu vaccine. People with certain conditions should especially get a flu vaccine, since they are at higher risk for serious side effects from the flu. These groups of people include:

- People 65 years old or older
- Nursing home residents
- People with serious health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma, lung disease, or HIV.
- Caregivers for older adults. This helps them avoid spreading the flu. There are flu vaccines that are specifically for people 65 or older. The CDC recommends that people 65 or older receive any of the flu vaccines specifically for older adults.

You should not get the flu vaccine if you have had an allergic reaction to the flu vaccine in the past. You should also not get a flu vaccine if you have been diagnosed with Guillian-Barre Syndrome within 6 weeks after previously receiving the flu vaccine.

When to get it: New strains of the flu develop all the time. Because of this, you should get the flu vaccine every year. You should get your flu vaccine in the fall.

■ COVID-19 Vaccine

What it does: Protects against getting seriously ill from COVID-19.

Who needs it: Everyone 65 years old or older should receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

When to get it: Adults 65 and older who have no immune problems should receive 2 doses of the 2024-2025 COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, or Novavax). You should get the vaccines 6 months apart.

If you have never had a COVID-19 vaccine before, and you choose Novavax, you should wait 3 weeks between the 1st and 2nd doses. You will also need to get a 3rd dose of any of the three COVID-19 vaccine 6 months after the 2nd dose. People who are immunocompromised may require additional vaccine shots and should ask their healthcare professional for guidance.

■ Shingles (Herpes Zoster) Vaccine

What it does: Protects you from getting shingles. This vaccine is called Shingrix. It is very effective in reducing the risk of shingles for older adults. It also protects people from developing a side effect that causes chronic pain (called postherpetic neuralgia).

Who needs it: The CDC recommends that people 50 years and older get the Shingrix vaccine. You should get the shingles vaccine even if you have had shingles before or received the older Zostavax shot which is no longer available in the US.

You should not get a Shingrix vaccine if you have had an allergic reaction to any of its ingredients before. You should also not get the vaccine if you currently have shingles. Wait until your symptoms are gone before getting the shingles shot.

When to get it: Shingrix requires two doses. The second dose should be given between 2-6 months after the first dose. If it has been longer than 6 months since the first dose, it's okay to get the second dose at any time.

■ RSV Vaccine

What it does: Protects you from getting Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV). RSV causes disease that affects the lungs in older adults, similar to influenza (flu). The vaccine also protects against serious illness if you do get RSV.

Who needs it: The CDC recommends that adults 75 years or older should receive the RSV vaccines. Adults 60-74 years old who are at increased risk for severe RSV disease should also receive the vaccine. (Conditions that can increase the risk of severe RSV disease include chronic heart and lung disease, serious kidney disease, problems with your immune system, severe diabetes, severe obesity, being frail, or living in a nursing home or other long-term care facility.)

You should not get an RSV vaccine if you have had an allergic reaction to any of its ingredients before. If you are currently sick (with or without fever), you should wait to get a vaccine until you feel better.

When to get it: The RSV vaccine requires one dose. It is best to get your shot in the fall. If you did not get vaccinated in the fall, you can—and should—get the RSV shot at any time of the year.

■ Pneumococcal (Pneumonia) Vaccine

What it does: Protects against serious illness caused by pneumococcal bacteria. Pneumococcal bacteria can cause pneumonia (a serious infection in the lungs) and infections of the blood and brain.

Who needs it: Anyone 50 years or older

When to get it: There are two kinds of pneumococcal vaccines available: Pneumococcal conjugate vaccines (PCV15, or PCV20) and pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPSV23). Ask your healthcare provider which vaccine is best for you.

■ Tetanus/Diphtheria Vaccine

What it does: There are two types of vaccine that protect you from two potentially deadly bacterial infections. One type is called TD. TD protects you from the diseases tetanus and diphtheria. The second type is called Tdap. Tdap protects you from tetanus, diphtheria, and another disease named pertussis (also called “whooping cough”).

Who needs it: Everyone. You should get a one-time dose of the Tdap vaccine if you are 65 or older and have not had the Tdap vaccine previously. This will help protect you and your grandchildren from whooping cough.

When to get it: Once every 10 years.

Other Vaccines for Older Adults

The CDC also recommends other vaccines for older adults. These include the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine, and vaccines for varicella, hepatitis A and B, and meningococcal disease. You could have a higher risk of getting these diseases if you have certain health problems, occupations, or lifestyles. Ask your healthcare provider if you should get any of these additional vaccines.

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The AGS Health in Aging Foundation is dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older people. We aim to empower older adults and caregivers to actively participate in their health care and decision-making.

DISCLAIMER: This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other healthcare provider. Always consult your healthcare provider about your medications, symptoms, and health problems. November 2024

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