Aging Gracefully: Why It's Wise to Immunize

So your children are all grown up and you're feeling like you have all the time in the world to enjoy yourself. Life is good. You're reasonably healthy and think immunizations are only for infants and children. Right?

Wrong! Believe it or not, older adults need to be immunized, too.

Complications from influenza (flu) and pneumococcal pneumonia, a type of infection of the lungs caused by bacteria, combined are the sixth leading cause of death in the United States. They cause at least 45,000 deaths each year. Getting the two vaccines—pneumococcal and influenza—decreases your chances of contracting these illnesses. They also help protect loved ones and others who come in contact with you from getting infected.

"All adults should be immunized to protect them from infectious diseases," says David Neumann, Ph.D., Director of the National Coalition for Adult Immunization in Bethesda, Maryland. "We tend not to think about the diseases. We say there are not many cases, so we don't have to be immunized. But the vaccinations' greatest impact is reducing the severity of symptoms and the need for hospitalizations."

The U.S. Public Health Service's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American Academy of Family Physicians both recommend an annual flu shot for adults age 50 and over. With the flu season just weeks away, mark your calendar NOW to get your influenza shot. It will help keep you healthy this winter. Mid-October to mid-November is a great time to get this immunization. You will be protected from these illnesses about two weeks after you receive the vaccine.

This year, not all the flu vaccines that are needed will be available in October. Only 70 percent of the total supply will be delivered to health departments and health care providers that month. Public health officials recommend that the elderly be given priority to receive the first available vaccine, along with individuals who are chronically ill and health care workers.

Despite what many people think, a flu shot cannot actually give you the flu. "Flu shots do not contain a live virus so they cannot cause the flu," says

Tamara Kicera, with the Adult Vaccine Preventable Diseases Branch of the CDC's National Immunization Program.

"That's a common misconception," Neumann says. "There are a number of other viruses that produce symptoms similar to the flu but are not the same [as the flu]." That's why folks may think they've gotten the flu after receiving the flu vaccine. Although the vaccine is made from a weak or dead disease germ, it doesn't give you influenza. Your body makes antibodies to fight the weak or dead germs in the vaccine. These protective antibodies safeguard you from the real, active disease germs.

Pneumococcal pneumonia, the most common cause of pneumonia, accounts for up to 35 percent of all adult pneumonias that lead to hospitalization. Unlike the influenza shot, which should be taken every year, only one dose of the vaccine that prevents pneumococcal pneumonia is typically recommended for adults. The U.S. Public Health Service highly recommends that adults over the age of 65 get this vaccine. If you were vaccinated before you turned 65 and it's been at least five years since you had that pneumococcal shot, however, be sure to get a second pneumococcal shot when you celebrate your 65th birthday.

Other vaccines that older adults need include the tetanus and mumps and measles vaccines. Physicians recommend a booster shot every 10 years for tetanus, also known as lockjaw. Older adults who have not had a tetanus shot every ten years are more susceptible to the disease, which enters the body through a cut or puncture wound and attacks certain muscle groups. Older adults who have never been immunized against mumps or measles should do so. These childhood illnesses can be deadly for older adults.

Immunizations may sometimes have mild side effects such as headache, low-grade fever or soreness where the shot was administered. Don't let the fear of those side effects or the cost of the vaccinations stop you from getting immunized. If you're covered by Medicare, the influenza and pneumococcal immunizations are free. If you're not covered by Medicare, check with your state health department to see if you can get these vaccinations for free. Many states allow pharmacists to administer immunizations. In addition, vaccinations are sometimes offered in special areas of grocery and discount department stores as convenient alternatives to visiting your doctor.

For more information about adult immunizations,

- Call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Immunization Hotline at 1-800-232-2522, or visit the Web site at **www.cdc.gov/nip**
- Look at the web site of the National Partnership for Immunization, **www.partnersforimmunization.org**
- Visit the web site of the National Coalition for Adult Immunization at **www.nfid.org/ncai**, or call 1-301-656-0003

"Also talk to your health care provider," Neumann says. "They are the people in the trenches and can address your concerns."

Don't risk getting preventable diseases. Fight them with some simple vaccinations. They can help you stay on the path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to subscribe to the listserv to receive tips on improving your health, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at ***http://www.4woman.gov****. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.*