

Flu Season for Seniors: Three Critical Steps to Staying Healthy



Brian Carrigan
Founder & CEO

Flu season is once again upon us, and while the flu does not discriminate based on age, it can present dire – and even tragic – outcomes for senior citizens.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) reports that compared to other demographic groups, citizens 65 and older are at greater risk of serious complication from the flu. The agency adds that due to the weakened immune system defenses of the elderly, 90 percent of seasonal flu-related deaths (and more than 60 percent of flu-related hospitalizations) affect older Americans.

There are three rather simple but critical steps to follow to lower the risk of acquiring the contagious disease. First and foremost is getting an annual flu vaccination as soon as the current season's vaccines are made available. The vaccine protects against several different viruses and is updated each year. Please note that for everyone, from toddlers to teenagers to adults to seniors, the flu shot must be updated every year. There is a common misconception that one flu shot will last for two or more years. Not true.

Additionally, if you are 65 and over, you may have a choice between two different vaccines: a “regular dose” via an injection or an “inoculation” (higher dosage level of the “regular shot” for an extra layer of protection). Discuss which vaccine is best for you with your physician.

A flu myth: “The flu shot makes me get the flu.” In years’ past, this might have been true for some (live viruses were used), but today, the serum consists of “dead strands” of the flu only. It is much, much better to have a flu shot, than to have not.

Another method for avoiding the flu is taking “everyday preventive action,” including avoiding contact with sick people; staying at home for at least a day if you exhibit flu-like symptoms; covering your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing (and washing your hands with soap and water as much as possible to cut down on the spread of germs); and cleaning and disinfecting potential germ-carrying objects.

And finally, if your doctor suggests taking a prescription antiviral drug, you need to do so. Antiviral medications can lessen both the severity and length of your illness, and studies have shown that antiviral drugs work best within two days of contracting the flu.

Nobody wants to get the flu, especially the elderly. As one doctor recently told me, “The best way to deal with the flu is simply not to get it.”

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