Vaccines for older adults

Do you think vaccinations are only for children? This is not the case. Those of us who are 50 and older can take steps to prevent illnesses and even death by being vaccinated – the flu alone kills more than 32,000 older adults each year in USA.

Influenza Vaccine
Flu comes around each year, usually between October and May, so influenza vaccination is recommended for all adults ages 50 and older and adults who have certain chronic medical conditions, (see below) and women who will be pregnant during flu season.

But any adult who wants to avoid the flu can get the shot. If you are vaccinated but still get sick, the good news is that the vaccine can make the illness milder.

Pneumococcal Vaccine
Many adults aren’t aware that the best way to protect themselves against pneumococcal bacterial pneumonia is to get vaccinated, especially if:

• You’re 65 or older
• You live in a nursing home or long-term care facility
• You have one or more of the chronic conditions listed below.

For most people, a single dose of this vaccine is recommended but some need more than one. Ask your healthcare provider about this.

Shingles Vaccine
If you’re 60 or older, ask your doctor about the shingles or herpes zoster vaccine. Approximately 1 million Americans develop shingles each year and more than half are aged 60 and older. Shingles — a painful, blistering rash that tends to occur on one side of the body — is a common illness that’s caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox.

Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk for shingles but the shingles vaccine can help prevent it and the painful complications that can follow it.

Tetanus-diphtheria Vaccine
When did you last have a tetanus shot? Most folks don’t think about this but it is important. Tetanus, caused by the tetanus bacterium, is a serious illness that can cause painful spasm of the muscles, “locking” of the jaw and even death.

According to the National Institutes of Health, the bacterium is found in saliva, soil, dust and manure and usually enters the body through a deep cut.

Gardeners are at special risk because they spend so much time with their hands in the soil. The tetanus vaccine can prevent tetanus but its protection wanes over time. Adults should get a tetanus shot or booster every 10 years. Combining it with diphtheria vaccine makes sense since this disease can occur in older adults and cause serious illness.

Higher Risk
Older adults with one or more of the following medical conditions – heart or lung disease, diabetes, liver or kidney disease or any immune system disease such as HIV—are especially at risk of developing the illnesses mentioned above.

Although vaccines are among the safest medical products available, there can be risk factors associated with them. For example, flu vaccine is grown in eggs so if you are allergic to eggs you could have a reaction. Talk to your healthcare provider if in doubt.

All vaccines can be administered by injection into the shoulder muscle. Pneumococcal vaccine and influenza vaccine can be administered at the
same time, one in each arm. The tetanus-diphtheria vaccine can be administered at the same time as these other vaccines.

There are also groups of people who should be vaccinated because their work exposes them to various infectious diseases, for example, healthcare workers in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living and home care workers. Residents of assisted living and nursing homes also benefit from being vaccinated.

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 additional shots.

Keep a Copy of Your Records
Vaccination records can be hard to track down. Over the years, doctors retire and medical practices change hands. To avoid having to repeat vaccinations during a health emergency or when you switch doctors, ask your health care provider for an immunization record and keep it safe.

A good resource for more information: www.cdc.gov/vaccines