

AgePage

Shots for Safety

As you get older, your doctor may recommend vaccinations — shots — to help prevent certain illnesses and to keep you healthy.

Talk with your doctor about which of the following shots you need, and make sure to protect yourself by keeping your vaccinations up to date.

Flu

Flu — short for influenza — is a virus that can cause fever, chills, sore throat, stuffy nose, headache, and muscle aches. Flu is very serious when it gets in your lungs. Older adults are at a higher risk for developing serious complications from flu, such as pneumonia.

The flu is easy to pass from person to person. The virus also changes over time, which means you can get it over and over again. When the virus changes, annual flu shot ingredients change. Also, the protection you get from a flu shot lessens with time, especially in older adults. That's why most people (age 6 months and older) should get the flu shot each year.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 coronavirus is a respiratory disease that causes symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath. It can lead to serious illness and death. For more information about NIH's research under development for a COVID-19 vaccine, visit www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/covid-19-clinical-research.

Ideally, you should get your shot between September and November. Then, you may be protected when the flu season starts. It takes at least 2 weeks for your shot to start working. There are special flu shots designed specifically for people age 65 and older. Medicare will pay for the shot, and so will many private health insurance plans. You can get a flu shot at your doctor's office or local health department, as well as some grocery and drug stores. The vaccine is the same wherever you receive it.

Pneumococcal Disease

Pneumococcal disease is a serious infection that spreads from person to person by air. It often causes pneumonia in the lungs, and it can affect other parts of the body.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), part of the federal government, adults who are 65 and older should have two pneumococcal vaccinations to help prevent the disease. You can get either of the two pneumococcal vaccines (but not both) when you get the influenza (flu) vaccine. Talk with your health care professional to find out when you should come back for the other pneumococcal vaccine.

Tetanus, Diphtheria, and Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Tetanus (sometimes called lockjaw) is caused by bacteria found in soil, dust, and manure. It enters the body through cuts in the skin.

Diphtheria is also caused by bacteria. It is a serious illness that can affect the tonsils, throat, nose, or skin. It can spread from person to person.

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is caused by bacteria. It is a serious illness that causes uncontrollable, violent coughing fits that often make it hard to breathe. It can spread from person to person.

Tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis can lead to death.

Getting the shot is the best way to keep from getting tetanus and diphtheria. Most people get their first shots as children. The CDC says that every

adult should get the Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis) vaccine once if they did not receive it as a teen (first recommended in 2005) to protect against pertussis (whooping cough), and then a Td (tetanus, diphtheria) booster shot every 10 years to keep you protected. Ask your doctor if and when you need a booster shot.

Shingles

Shingles is caused by the same virus as chickenpox. If you had chickenpox, the virus is still in your body. The virus could become active again and cause shingles.

Shingles affects the nerves. Common symptoms include burning, shooting pain, tingling, and/or itching, as well as a rash and fluid-filled blisters. Even when the rash disappears, the pain can remain.

The shingles vaccine is safe and easy, and it may keep you from getting shingles and ongoing pain called post-herpetic neuralgia, or PHN. Healthy adults age 50 and older should get vaccinated with a shingles vaccine called Shingrix, which is given in two doses. Zostavax, a previous shingles vaccine, is no longer available in the United States.

You should try to get the second dose of Shingrix between two and six months after you get the first dose. If your doctor or pharmacist is out of Shingrix, you can use the Vaccine Finder, www.vaccinefinder.org, to help find other providers who have Shingrix. You can also contact pharmacies in your area and ask to be put on a waiting list for Shingrix. If it's been more than six months since you got the first dose, you should get the second dose as soon as possible. You don't need to get a first dose again.

You should get a Shingrix shot even if you have already had shingles, received Zostavax, or don't remember having had chickenpox. However, you should not get a Shingrix shot if you have a fever or illness, have a weakened immune system, or have had an allergic reaction to Shingrix. Check with your doctor if you are not sure what to do.

You can get the shingles vaccine at your doctor's office and at some pharmacies. All Medicare Part D plans and most private health insurance plans will cover the cost.

Measles, Mumps, and Rubella

Measles, mumps, and rubella are viruses that cause several flu-like symptoms but may lead to much more serious, long-term health problems, especially in adults.

The vaccine given to children to prevent measles, mumps, and rubella has made these diseases rare. If you don't know if you've had the diseases or the shot, you can still get the vaccine.

Side Effects of Shots

Common side effects for all these shots are mild and include pain, swelling, or redness where the shot was given.

Before getting any vaccine, make sure it's safe for you. Talk with your doctor about your health history, including past illnesses and treatments, as well as any allergies.

It's a good idea to keep your own shot record, listing the types and dates of your shots, along with any side effects or problems.

Shots for Travel

Check with your doctor or local health department about shots you will need if traveling to other countries. Sometimes, a series of shots is needed. It's best to get them at least four to six weeks before you travel to give you enough time to build up immunity and get the best protection from vaccines that may require multiple doses. For more information, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, www.cdc.gov, or call its information line for international travelers at 800-232-4636.

For More Information About Shots and Vaccines

American Lung Association

800-586-4872 (toll-free)

info@lung.org

www.lung.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

800-232-4636 (toll-free)

888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)

cdcinfo@cdc.gov

www.cdc.gov

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

877-645-2448

nhlbiinfo@nhlbi.nih.gov

www.nhlbi.nih.gov

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

866-284-4107 (toll-free)

800-877-8339 (TTY/toll-free)

ocpostoffice@niaid.nih.gov

www.niaid.nih.gov

For information on health and aging, including resources on caregiving and Alzheimer's disease, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

800-222-2225 (toll-free)

800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

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December 2020