

Flu + You

Protect. Learn. Understand. Safeguard.
Educating older adults about influenza and prevention
From the National Council on Aging and Sanofi Pasteur



Influenza, commonly known as “the flu,” is a contagious illness that can be severe and life-threatening, especially for older adults.

- Symptoms of the flu often include high fever, headache, tiredness, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and body aches.
- The flu is easily passed from person to person through coughing, sneezing, or through contact with fluids from an infected person’s mouth or nose.
- One reason that flu can be severe for older adults is that the immune system weakens with age, which makes it harder to fight disease.
- Each year in the United States, more than half (50-60%) of flu-related hospitalizations and almost all (90%) of flu-related deaths occur in people 65 years of age and older.

The flu can be dangerous in older adults as it can make other chronic health conditions like heart disease and diabetes worse.

- A recent NCOA survey of more than 1,000 U.S. adults 65 years of age and older found that about one third of survey respondents were aware that someone with chronic health conditions like heart disease or diabetes would be at risk for complications from the flu.
- People with these chronic health conditions are more likely to develop complications from the flu that can result in hospitalization and even death.
 - 86% of adults aged 65 and older have at least one chronic condition, and 68% of Medicare beneficiaries have two or more.
 - Among adults 65 years of age and older, about 30% have heart disease, and about 20% have diabetes.

While flu hits older adults the hardest, many seniors underestimate the seriousness of the flu.

- The 2014-2015 flu season recorded the highest hospitalization rates among people 65 years of age and older in recent history.
- The NCOA survey found that 82% of seniors are not extremely confident in their knowledge of the age-related decline of the immune system as it relates to the flu.
- Additionally, only 13% of seniors are extremely confident in their knowledge of possible flu complications.

Vaccination is the best way to help protect yourself and others from the flu.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends annual flu vaccination for everyone six months of age and older, with rare exception.
- It is estimated that during the 2013-2014 flu season, nearly 50,000 hospitalizations were averted due to vaccination in those 65 years of age and older.
- For seniors, it’s important to get vaccinated early in the season. A study shows that early vaccination is associated with greater benefit compared to later in the season.
- Older adults have flu vaccine options – including the regular flu shot and a higher-dose vaccine developed specifically to address the age-related weakening of the immune system.
- Flu vaccination is a Medicare benefit with no copay. Both vaccine options are widely available at a doctor’s office or local pharmacy.

However, seniors are largely unaware of their flu vaccination options, and further education and resources are needed.

- Only 8% of NCOA survey respondents are concerned about getting the flu, despite the high hospitalization rates in seniors.
- More than half (57%) are unaware that there is a flu shot specifically for their age group.
- Overall, adults 65 years of age and older are not extremely confident in their knowledge of resources for information about the flu.

Talk to your health care provider about flu prevention and your vaccine options.

Visit www.ncoa.org/Flu for more information.