

Flu Season – Time for Vaccinations!

With the exciting word ‘f’ word ‘football season’ on the tips of tongues, I hesitate to bring up the other ‘f’ word that many of you have seen on the news lately-‘flu season.’ With that comes the inevitable word ‘vaccination.’ I gladly defer my column space this week to Regional Extension Agent for Human Health, Diet and Nutrition Donna Shanklin, who discusses several different conditions, in addition to influenza, that seniors can receive vaccinations for.

Most seniors are aware of the need to receive an annual flu shot to minimize the potential for developing a deadly infection, but they often don’t ask their health care provider about other immunizations that may be available. Pneumonia, tetanus, diphtheria and shingles are four diseases in which vaccines are available.

Pneumococcal pneumonia is a serious illness, bacterial in origin that kills thousands of older people in the United States each year. The vaccine does not protect against viral pneumonia but does protect against almost all of the bacteria that cause pneumococcal pneumonia.

For most people, the vaccine works. One shot lasts up to 10 years. Anyone who has had pneumonia before should get the shot. The shot, which is covered by Medicare, can be a lifesaver. The U.S. Public Health Service, the National Coalition for Adult Immunization, and the American Lung Association now recommend that all people age 65 and older get this vaccine.

Diphtheria and tetanus are serious diseases caused by bacteria. Also known as whooping cough, it is making a comeback in seniors because childhood vaccinations have worn off. Diphtheria is spread from person to person, whereas tetanus enters the body through cuts or wounds. Diphtheria causes a thick covering in the back of the throat. It can lead to breathing problems, paralysis, heart failure and even death.

Tetanus (lockjaw) causes painful tightening of the muscles. It can lead to locking of the jaw so the victim cannot open his or her mouth or swallow. Tetanus leads to death in up to two out of 10 cases. There are two vaccines --Tdap and Td -- that protect adults against tetanus and diphtheria. A vaccination is recommended every 10 years to prevent these diseases.

Shingles is a painful skin rash caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). Symptoms of shingles include a painful skin rash of blister-like lesions that are often localized to a small area on one side of the body. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, chills and upset stomach. In 2008, a vaccine called Zostavax became available.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends Zostavax for people age 60 and older to prevent shingles. The vaccine is effective for at least six years or more.

A person should make sure that the shingles rash has disappeared before getting vaccinated. Most experts recommend waiting at least 12 months between the occurrence of shingles and a repeat vaccination.

The cost for vaccinations varies. Medicare covers the pneumonia vaccine but some private insurance policies or Medicaid may or may not cover the other vaccines. Contact your insurer to find out. As with any vaccinations, there are groups that should not receive a particular vaccine. Visit www.immunize.org or contact the Alabama Public Health Department for more information about vaccination issues and availability.