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News Release

Senior Adults Need Vaccinations

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.

Pneumonia

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. People who have 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.

Tetanus/Diphtheria

Diphtheria and tetanus are serious diseases caused by bacteria. 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. Diphtheria or whooping cough is making a comeback in seniors because childhood vaccinations have worn off.

Shingles

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. Beginning in 2008, a vaccine called Zostavax became available. The Centers for Disease Control recommends Zostavax for people age 60 and older to prevent shingles. It is a one-time vaccination. The more severe effects of shingles typically affect adults older than 60. The CDC recommends this age group receive the vaccination.

The vaccine is made up of a weakened form of the chickenpox virus. The shingles vaccine is effective for at least six years or more. It can be used to help prevent future occurrences of the disease also. 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.

Because physicians' offices often do not keep the zoster vaccine in stock, patients may have to purchase it and transport it to their physicians.

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. A person with allergic reactions to any component of the vaccine – from the gelatin in the zoster vaccine to an individual taking high-dose steroids, or women that might be pregnant. Please consult your doctor.

The Immunization Action Coalition ([http:// www.immunize.org](http://www.immunize.org)) has much more information about vaccination issues. Although the Web site was developed for health professional s, the information may assist potential vaccine recipients by answering specific questions about any vaccine. The CDC also has an online quiz called “What vaccines do you need” that may help seniors determine what vaccines they should consider <http://www2.cdc.gov/nip/adultImmSched/>. County public health offices also may have information to assist in making the decision to receive a vaccine or not.

For more information on this topic or other health-related topics, please contact Donna Shanklin, Regional Extension Agent—Health at the St. Clair County Extension office at 205-338-9416 or email drs0009@aces.edu.

Resources Used:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Shingles (Herpes Zoster) Vaccination
<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/default.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Herpes Zoster Vaccine (Shingles) Q&A
<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/vac-faqs.htm>

Foundation for Better Health Care: Pneumonia
<http://www.fbhc.org/Patients/Modules/pneumonia.cfm>

Immunization Action Coalition: Ask the Experts: Zoster (Shingles)
http://www.immunize.org/askexperts/experts_zos.asp

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Adult Immunization Schedule
<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm5753-Immunization.pdf>

National Foundation for Infectious Diseases
<http://www.nfid.org/pdf/factsheets/pneuadult.pdf>

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