

# For older Canadians, the flu shot is a lifesaver

**It's hard to admit, but summer is gone and we're once again quickly approaching the season of pumpkin spice, icy sidewalks, and influenza. That means it's time for Canadians, especially older Canadians, to get their annual flu shot.**

By D.F. McCourt

It's all too easy to put off getting the flu shot and to think that you won't get the flu, or that if you do, it won't be that bad. But every year, over 12,000 Canadians are hospitalized because of influenza complications, and about 3,500 die as a result. And the older you get, the greater risk you're at. "When you're older and get sick with influenza, you're more likely to develop severe complications, be hospitalized, and even die," says Dr. Bryna Warshawsky, Medical Director of Communicable Diseases and Emergency Preparedness and Response at Public Health Ontario. "Approximately 85 per cent of the people who die from influenza are over the age of 65, as are 55 to 70 per cent of those hospitalized."

## Thousands of families lose loved ones every year

Philip Emberley, Director of Practice Advancement and Research at the Canadian Pharmacists Association, has seen the dangerous side of influenza, both as a professional and within his own family. "My mother passed away in 2015 and the cause of death was influenza B, one of the flu viruses that often affects Canadians," says Emberley. "That was very poignant and reminded me that older adults are particularly vulnerable to the flu."

Even among Canadians lucky enough to be young, hale, and hearty, most of us come into contact with loved ones or even strangers who are at increased risk, and we risk passing the virus on to them. By getting immunized, we can protect not only ourselves, but those who need that protection most. "Older adults don't respond to the flu shot as well as younger adults," says Emberley. "They don't launch as powerful of a defence mechanism when they get the flu shot. My mother had actually had the flu shot in her nursing home, but she still contracted the flu. That really underscores the need for those around more vulnerable people to also be immunized."

Of course, for every tragic story like that of Emberley's mother, there are even more stories of people who are hospitalized with influenza and survive. But surviving influenza doesn't mean getting out unscathed, especially as you get older. "The longer you're in the



Philip Emberley photographed on the UBC campus in Vancouver, BC. (Photo: Tanya Goehring Photography)

hospital, the more debilitated you become," says Dr. Warshawsky. "You lose muscle mass, you become more prone to complications, and you can end up losing your independence. There are many adults who

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are older and have some frailty, but who are still independent and living in the community. For them, it can only take one bout of bad influenza to tip the scales so that they're no longer able to cope on their own."

## Fighting misinformation about the flu shot

Given all this information, why do Canadian immunization numbers remain so far below the targets? A lot of it comes down to education and the need to eradicate some persistent myths. "There are a number of misconceptions about the flu shot," says Emberley. "There are people who believe the flu shot exposes them to the active flu virus and that they can actually get sick as a result of it. This is simply not true. There are also ongoing beliefs that the flu shot can cause certain diseases like autism. These ideas come from false evidence that was discredited many years ago."

The other big myth about the vaccine is that it's simply not effective. The vaccine is formulated each year against the flu strains that are expected to be most prevalent that winter. It's a bit of a guessing game,

but scientists are bringing stronger predictive tools and models to bear every year. And even when they miss, those who get the shot are still more protected than those who don't. "It's possible that sometimes the strains in the vaccine won't end up matching what's actually circulating," says Dr. Warshawsky. "In those years, vaccination won't provide as much protection, but you can't know that in advance. The vaccine is not perfect, but it's still way better than not being vaccinated at all."

The flu shot is incredibly safe, quite effective, and the only real option for preventing the flu and its often severe consequences. With immunization being increasingly available at local pharmacies across the country, it's quick and convenient for every Canadian to get vaccinated. Don't put it off. Protect yourself and others as early in the season as you can.

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