

The flu is a big deal for Canada's aging population

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It's that time of year again: flu season. This year, specially-designed vaccines for Canadians over the age of 65 are recommended to provide additional protection.



Dr. Shelly McNeil, Chair, Immunize Canada

Every year, [5 to 10 per cent of Canadian adults](#) will get sick with the flu and, while most will recover in one to two weeks, for some the complications will be severe, life-changing, or even life-threatening. This is especially true for those in higher risk groups, like adults over the age of 65 and any adult with a [chronic health condition](#) like diabetes, heart disease, or lung disease. The influenza vaccine can benefit everyone, but for older Canadians especially, the vaccine can be a lifesaver.

“The immune system weakens as we get older,” explains Dr. Janet McElhaney, Scientific Director and Vice-President of Research at Health Sciences North Research Institute. “Roughly 50 per cent of people aged 65 and older have two or more chronic conditions. The confluence of these existing conditions and a weakened immune system can cause older Canadians who catch the flu to get much sicker than they would have when they were younger.”

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), Canada's authority on infectious diseases and vaccination, regularly updates their recommendations regarding the influenza vaccine. In their most recent recommendation, they highlighted the particular needs of older adults. “One of the things that has changed recently with the NACI recommendations is that they're now talking about vaccine options for people over the age of 65,” says Dr. Shelly McNeil, Chair of Immunize Canada. “They're now beginning to address some newer vaccines that are available that may provide better protection than the standard vaccine against severe illness due to influenza in that age group.”

The high-dose vaccine and the adjuvanted vaccine are two options mentioned in the recommendation. The high-dose vaccine is currently showing roughly [24 per cent greater effectiveness than a standard-dose vaccine in older adults](#), and it has been adopted in Manitoba for use in seniors as part of their public immunization program. The adjuvanted vaccine is showing [a higher immune response in people over 65 compared to the unadjuvanted vaccine](#). Depending on the province or territory, access to both newer vaccines may require prescription and out-of-pocket payment this flu season.

Anything that provides extra protection against the flu for older adults is welcome, as the disease not only affects them more strongly, but can also lead to irreversible changes in their health and ability. “Older Canadians who get the flu are at a high risk of losing their independence,” says Dr. McElhaney. “People have to keep in mind that they can lose up to [5 per cent of their functional muscle strength](#)

every day that they are in a hospital bed. So older people can walk in to a hospital as a healthy active adult, and come out weaker, needing rehabilitation, and at higher risk for additional problems. In many cases they will never regain the level of health and activity they had before hospitalization.”

The permanence and severity of these effects greatly compound the importance of vaccination. The [standard vaccine prevents about 40 per cent of influenza hospitalizations in adults over 65](#), and that can mean dramatically improved outcomes for millions of Canadians. “There's no question that older adults will benefit from an influenza vaccine,” says Dr. McNeil. “How much they benefit can depend on a lot of things like underlying health conditions and immunosuppression, but may also depend on which specific vaccine they receive. Everyone planning to be vaccinated should talk to their health provider about vaccine options.”

Both for your own health and for your friends and family, talking about the flu vaccine with a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist is vital to staying healthy through the winter.
