

Immunization

Shots — or immunizations — are not just for children. Adults also need immunizations (vaccinations) to protect themselves from certain diseases. In fact, some shots are more important for older adults than they are for younger people.

What Types of Shots Do I Need?

Since older adults have a higher risk of getting certain diseases or developing complications from these diseases, there are immunizations that older adults should usually get:

- Flu shots
- Pneumonia (Pneumococcal) vaccine
- Tetanus-diphtheria (Td) Booster

Why Do I Need a Flu Shot?

Influenza (or flu) is a common respiratory illness affecting millions of Canadians each year. In Canada, flu season usually runs from November to April.¹ The most effective way to protect yourself from the flu is to be vaccinated each year in the fall. Regular hand washing is another way to help minimize your risk. By washing your hands often, you will reduce your chance of becoming infected. Most people get better within a week or two, but the flu can lead to complications, such as pneumonia. This is more common in people over 65 and those with chronic medical conditions. Flu shots are recommended for:

- People over age 65 years old.
- People of any age with a chronic medical condition such as diabetes, kidney disease, heart or lung disease.

When Should I Get My Flu Shot?

Because flu viruses change all the time, it is best to get a flu shot **every year**. Do not get a flu shot before checking with your doctor if you:

- Are allergic to chicken eggs
- Have had a severe reaction to a flu shot in the past, including developing Guillain-Barre' syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks after getting a flu shot. GBS is a disease of the nerve cells that results in muscle weakness and sometimes paralysis.

¹ Health Canada (2008). *Seasonal influenza (Flu)*. Accessed September 9, 2008, from, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dc-ma/influenza/index-eng.php#1>.

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Why Do I Need a Pneumonia Vaccine? Each year an estimated 4,000 to 8,000 Canadians, mostly seniors, die from pneumonia related to flu and many others may die from other serious complications of flu.² The vaccine covers about 85 to 90% of the strains of the pneumococcal bacteria. People who get the vaccine are protected about 60% of the time. The pneumonia vaccine is recommended for:

- People over age 65 years old.
- People of any age with a chronic medical condition such as diabetes, kidney disease, heart or lung disease.
- People with a weak immune system such as people with cancer, organ transplants, or HIV infection.

Doctors agree that these high-risk people should get the vaccine at least once. They disagree whether or not a second vaccine may be helpful.

Why Do I Need a Pneumonia Vaccine? Some doctors recommend that a second dose be taken if a person received the vaccine more than 6 years ago and was less than 65 years old the first time the vaccine was given.

What Is a Td Booster? Td stands for Tetanus-diphtheria. Most people get their first vaccine as a child, a shot usually called a DTP. Largely as a result of routine immunization, tetanus and diphtheria have become very uncommon in the U.S. But, it is still important to have shots against these serious diseases. For adults, a combination shot, called a “Td booster,” protects against both tetanus and diphtheria.

When to Get a Td Booster Shot? If you have a severe cut or puncture wound, and have not had a booster in the past 5 to 10 years, you should ask your doctor about one. Generally, you should get a Td booster shot about every 10 years to protect yourself against these rare, but dangerous, illnesses. Mid-decade birthdays (55, 65, 75, and so forth) are good times to remember to do this.

Resources **Organization**
Health Canada
Web site: www.hc-sc.ca

² Health Canada (2008).

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