

NATIONAL IMMUNIZATION AWARENESS MONTH

Highlighting the importance of vaccinations for those of all ages is the annual goal of National Immunization Awareness Month, but for vulnerable populations like older adults, spreading awareness becomes imperative.



“Infection is a major risk for older adults. Because of several different factors, adults 65 years and older tend to get more infections and they are typically more severe,” said Brigham and Women’s Hospital geriatrician and internist Julia Loewenthal, MD.

The immune system slows in its functions **as we age**. However, the risk of developing illnesses due to a decline in immunity are partially mitigated with appropriate vaccinations.

“Some of the immune system functions decline with aging,” Dr. Loewenthal said. “Older adults are also more prone to infections because of chronic diseases. In addition, they may be taking immune-suppressing medications.”

A 2017 report from the CDC revealed that there is still room for improvement in the number of older adults who received the recommended vaccinations for their age group.

“The most important vaccinations for adults 65 years and older are the influenza vaccine, pneumococcal vaccine, and zoster vaccine. These target common infections that can cause serious complications,” Dr. Loewenthal explained. “Older adults have the lowest vaccination rate for herpes zoster, also called shingles. This can be a terribly painful infection with complications.”

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center Associate Chief of Gerontology Suzanne Salamon, MD, said that after adults reach age 65, a flu shot, **Tdap** and **Td**, pneumonia, and shingles vaccinations are recommended.

"Because our immunity - our natural ability to fight off infections - gets weaker as we get older, it is important that people get these vaccines, no matter how old they are," she said.

Dr. Yonatan Grad, Melvin J. and Geraldine L. Glimcher Assistant Professor of Immunology and Infectious Diseases at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, said there are a wealth of resources, such as immunization recommendations, available through the CDC.



"In brief, **the CDC recommendations** are: seasonal influenza vaccine every year; a tetanus/diphtheria/pertussis vaccine once if you haven't received it before to protect against pertussis and then a tetanus/diphtheria booster vaccine every 10 years; shingles vaccine for healthy adults 50 years and older; and pneumococcal vaccines for all adults over 65, as well as for some adults younger than 65 who have some chronic health conditions," he said.

Though the need for immunizations for those of any age is well-established, there are still other factors to consider when recommending vaccinations for older adults. According to Dr. Grad, there are no age limits on vaccination, but there are reasons why someone should not receive a vaccine. Dr. Loewenthal concurs: those at certain stages of declining health may not necessarily benefit.

"All adults should continue receiving vaccinations no matter their age [but] there are special considerations for those who are immunosuppressed due to certain diseases and/or medications," Dr. Loewenthal said. "Also, older adults very near the end of their lives receiving hospice care may not benefit from certain vaccinations.

"Currently, there is very little research in this area, but hopefully future studies and recommendations will be designed with our aging population in mind."