Stay safe: Get a flu shot during a pandemic

By Barbara Mitchell

Influenza (the flu) can be a serious illness, especially for older adults.

FACT: People 65 years and older are not only at high risk of serious flu complications, but also at risk for severe illness from COVID-19. People’s immune systems become weaker with age placing people 65 years and older at high risk of serious illnesses compared with young, healthy adults.

During most seasons, people 65 years and older bear the greatest burden of severe flu disease. Between about 70 percent and 85 percent of seasonal flu-related deaths in the United States occur among people 65 years and older. And people 65 and older account for between about 50% and 70% of the flu-related hospitalizations.

An annual flu vaccine is the best way to reduce your risk of flu and its potentially serious consequences.

FACT: While flu vaccine can vary in how well it works, vaccination is the best way to prevent flu and its potentially serious complications. Flu vaccination has been shown to reduce the risk of flu illness and more serious flu outcomes that can result in hospitalization or even death in older people.

While some people who get vaccinated may still get sick, flu vaccination has been shown in several studies to reduce severity of illness in those people.

People 65 years and older can get any flu shot approved for use in that age group. There are regular-dose flu shots that are approved for use in people 65 and older and there are also vaccines designed specifically for people 65 and older, such as a high dose vaccine. Check with your healthcare provider for more information on the types of vaccines available.

It is also especially important for people at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19, and those who live with them, to protect themselves from getting COVID-19.

The best way to protect yourself and to help reduce the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 is to:

• Limit your interactions with other people as much as possible.
• Take precautions to prevent getting COVID-19 when you do interact with others, such as wearing a mask, physically distancing yourself from them, washing hands frequently and staying home when you are sick.

FACT: The side effects of flu shots are mild when compared to potentially serious consequences of flu infection. After getting your flu shot, you may experience some mild side effects. The most common side effects include soreness, tenderness, redness and/or swelling where the shot was given. Sometimes you might have a headache, muscle aches, fever, and nausea or feel tired.

FACT: Flu can make long-term health problems worse, even if they are well-managed. Diabetes, asthma, and chronic heart disease (even if well-managed) are among the most common long-term medical conditions that place people at high risk of serious flu complications. It is particularly important that all adults with these or other chronic medical conditions get a flu vaccine every year.

FACT: There are prescription drugs that can treat influenza virus infections. People 65 and older should be treated with influenza antiviral drugs if they get sick with flu. If you have flu symptoms – even if you had a flu shot – call your doctor, nurse, or clinic. Doctors can prescribe medicine, called antiviral drugs, to treat flu and lessen the chance of serious illness. These medicines work better the sooner they are started.

Call if you have any or all of the following symptoms:

• Fever or feeling feverish/chills
• Cough
• Sore throat
• Runny or stuffy nose
• Muscle or body aches
• Headache
• Fatigue (tiredness)
• Sometimes diarrhea and vomiting

It’s important that antiviral drugs be used early to treat flu in people who are very sick with flu (for example, people who are in the hospital), and people who are sick with flu and are at high risk of serious flu complications, like people 65 and older.

Take control of your health, especially while COVID-19 is circulating in the community and fight flu this season with an annual flu vaccine.

Go to the Johnson County Department of Health and Environment’s flu webpage for vaccine availability and information: jocogov.org/dept/health-and-environment/health/flu/flu-shots.

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