



# Vaccines:

## A Quick Guide for Older Adults



*A vaccination is a biological preparation that gives you a simple, safe, and effective way to protect against harmful diseases.*

A vaccine triggers the body to produce immunity (protection) against a disease. Most vaccines are given by an injection. Some are given once; others may need to be repeated on a timetable.

## Vaccines help protect health for people of all ages.

Both children and older adults can be especially vulnerable to certain infectious diseases and their risks. **Your healthcare provider will recommend specific vaccinations for you based on your age and medical condition. Here is a guide to vaccines that are commonly recommended for older adults.**

**Pneumonia vaccine:** Pneumonia is a serious respiratory disease that leads to 150,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths every year, mostly among older people, says the CDC. The pneumonia bacteria, which start out affecting nose and throat, can go on to infect the lungs, the blood, or even the brain. There are two types of pneumonia vaccines, and they provide significant protection against pneumonia, says the CDC. Your healthcare provider may recommend more than one pneumonia vaccine dose for you.

**RSV vaccine:** RSV is a common respiratory virus. It can cause fever, coughing, wheezing, sneezing, runny nose, and a decrease in appetite. Usually, RSV symptoms are mild or absent in adults, says the CDC. However, older adults and people with certain chronic medical conditions risk serious symptoms, such as trouble breathing and low oxygen levels. The CDC recommends the RSV vaccine for all adults ages 75 and older and for adults ages 60–74 who have certain medical conditions.

**Shingles vaccine:** Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. It affects about 1 million people in the U.S. every year. “If you had chickenpox, the virus is still in your body. As you get older, the virus could become active again and cause shingles,” explains the National Institute on Aging. Shingles causes a painful rash and nerve symptoms, such as burning, shooting pain, tingling, and itching. Shingles typically lasts 3-5 weeks and can also cause lingering pain afterwards. The vaccine, called Shingrix, is given in 2 doses.

**Tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis vaccine:** Also called Tdap, this vaccine helps protect against three illnesses: tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. **Tetanus** is caused by bacteria that live in soil. The germ can enter the body through a cut. It is nicknamed “lockjaw” because it causes spasms of the jaw muscles, along with other serious symptoms. **Diphtheria** is a serious respiratory disease that can affect the lungs and can also damage the heart, kidneys and nervous system. **Pertussis** (also called whooping cough) is a very contagious respiratory illness with cold-like symptoms. It can cause violent coughing and choking, making it hard to breathe, drink, or eat. The combined Tdap vaccine helps protect against all three illnesses and is usually recommended every 10 years for adults.

**COVID vaccine:** Older adults can be at a heightened risk of serious illness from COVID, says the National Institute on Aging. “The vaccine will also help keep you from getting seriously ill or having to go to the hospital if you do get COVID-19,” they explain. Vaccination can also help prevent long COVID. Some people wonder whether they need a vaccine if they’ve already had COVID. The CDC says, “Vaccination is more reliable way to build protection than getting sick.” COVID immunity can drop over time, and strains of the COVID virus change. This is why your healthcare provider may recommend routine COVID vaccination.

**Flu vaccine:** Caused by viruses, flu (also called influenza) can cause high fever, chills, a dry cough, headache, runny nose, sore throat, and muscle and joint pain, says the CDC. “Older adults and those with certain health conditions are at high risk for serious complications,” they add. This vaccine is adjusted every year to target prevailing strains of flu viruses, so getting the annual flu vaccine is recommended. For older adults, your provider may suggest a high-dose version of the flu vaccine, which the CDC recommends for people over age 65. The high-dose version helps create a stronger immune response to protect you.

**If you travel outside the U.S. or if you have specific health conditions, your healthcare provider may recommend additional vaccines. The important thing is to talk with your healthcare provider about what vaccinations you need and stay up-to-date.**

***Vaccinations are a simple way to protect your health as you age well.***

Sources: CDC. CDC.gov | National Institute on Aging. *Vaccinations and Older Adults*. www.nia.nih.gov

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