

OCTOBER 27, 2016 LAST UPDATED: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2016, 1:21 AM

Getting flu and pneumonia shots are wise moves for men



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Vaccinations for flu and pneumonia should be priorities in one's health regimen. Both illnesses are potentially deadly or can be debilitating, particularly for older adults and individuals with immunity lowering medical conditions.

BY KATHLEEN MATHIEUSPECIAL TO HEALTH QUARTERLY
THE RECORD

Gentlemen, when it comes to the flu or pneumonia, consider yourself on deadline. Getting hit with one of these not rare diseases might hinge on whether you have had the vaccinations that

prevent or lessen the effects of the potentially deadly conditions — not that men are particularly vulnerable because of their gender. Both diseases are "equal opportunity infectors," said Suraj Saggar, DO, infectious disease specialist at Holy Name Medical Center.

Your Choices Count

The decision to take on the flu season without proper immunization puts you and the people around you at greater peril than necessary. "Nothing in the history of modern medicine has saved lives like vaccinations," said Dr. Saggar. "And, don't be afraid to get a flu shot," said Andrew Granas, MD, medical director of Valley Medical Group Primary and Urgent Care Center — Waldwick. "There is nothing in the flu shot that can make you sick," said Dr. Granas.

For those who get the flu despite receiving the immunization — a function of the fact that it does not protect against all kinds of flu — the inoculation provides an element of protection, said the family medicine specialist. "My experience is that people who get the flu shot have a milder case of the flu." With rare exception, everyone six months and older should be vaccinated annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Both physicians recommend being vaccinated against pneumonia. Pneumonia vaccines help fight off the worse forms of the disease, said Dr. Granas. "All are basically preventing you from getting the most dangerous kinds." Be far more fearful about getting pneumonia — or the flu — than getting the almost universally recommended shots to stop them. "The pneumonia shot is a very valuable and safe vaccine," said the doctor.

Take Care of Yourself and Others

If you are willing to roll the dice with your own health, think about how your behavior might harm others. For just one example, do you really want to get up one morning with the flu having held the new baby in the family the night before? Children under six months of age, who are too young to be vaccinated, are at highest risk for the disease, according to the CDC, which provides a long list of related possibilities for these little ones on its website. For them, possible complications from the flu include pneumonia, dehydration, worsening of medical problems such as heart disease or asthma, inflammation of the brain, sinus problems and ear infections, as well as death in rare cases.

Stuff Matters

So, what should you do if you think you could have the flu or pneumonia? Sure, you might be able to stick it out without terrible results, but taking a chance leaves you open to a host of nasty

consequences. The flu might morph into pneumonia, myocarditis, sepsis and multi-organ failure, among other serious conditions. Pneumonia can result in very rapid death, said Dr. Saggar. "You want to intervene as quickly as possible." Respect the red flags of your condition — you know when you feel particularly ill, he said. "People know their own bodies."

Your overall health, including your true, not chronological, age is in play when it comes to these diseases. The way your body has aged makes a difference, said Dr. Saggar, pointing to diet and exercise as key factors in aging and reversing that process, as well. Diabetes, smoking, vascular disease and illnesses that suppress the immune system help determine your susceptibility, too.

Stress, overwork and insufficient rest can weaken the immune system, noted Dr. Granas. And, do be conscientious about the ordinary practices that lessen the spread of disease to family, friends and co-workers, such as covering your mouth and nose as needed, staying home when you are sick, and washing your hands with due diligence. (CDC recommendations can be found <http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html>.) Consider the apt term used to describe the most common category of pneumonia, community — acquired pneumonia (CAP), the emphasis being on the word "community," said the doctor.

Not a Job for Amateurs

Don't attempt to diagnosis yourself, and put aside Dr. Internet. Consult your healthcare provider if you suspect the flu or pneumonia, and don't expect to get medicine without making an office visit. "The idea of giving a prescription over the phone is out of favor," said Dr. Saggar. Your best interests are at heart. "The doctor has just saved you from the effects of the misuse of antibiotics — an infinite amount of side effects." Just as pneumonia has its own dangers due to its ability to worsen quickly with life-threatening consequences, the ideal treatment of the flu has its own window of opportunity. Dr. Saggar usually prescribes Tamiflu for his flu patients who present within the first 48 hours after the onset of symptoms, with this time frame being critical. He also uses this antiviral drug to prevent the illness in individuals in close contact with flu sufferers, such as spouses.

Pneumonia patients can benefit from expert care, too. Shortness of breath, a dry or productive cough, a crackling sound that suggests water in the lungs, wheezing and very coarse breath sounds are signs of pneumonia, which is diagnosed by evaluating numerous criteria, even to the extent of ascertaining whether the infection is viral or bacterial. "You have to differentiate," said Dr. Saggar. "That's where the art of medicine comes in."