Immunizations reduce risk of illness for elderly: NetWellness

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By Special to The Plain Dealer

More than a third of U.S. deaths are preventable. Pneumonia and influenza remain in the top 10 causes of death for people 65 and above.

Now is the time to encourage older adults to get a flu shot and make sure they are up-to-date on other immunizations.

Immunizations are one of the most effective means to reduce the risk of illness for older people. Deadly diseases such as influenza and pneumonia are largely preventable by vaccination. Anyone who knows something about the 1918 flu epidemic that killed countless people all over the world will tell you that the flu shot is a miracle life saver.

Most of us have experienced the loss of a patient or loved one to pneumonia or associated complications that, perhaps, could have been prevented through immunization. In addition to flu
and pneumovax vaccines, many health professionals are recommending patients get the shingles vaccination to ward off the severe nerve pain flare up that may attack anyone who has had chickenpox.

Even though immunization is available, recommended by health professionals, and payment is often covered by Medicare, there remain countless numbers of older people who do not receive the immunization.

The 2007 CDC report State of Aging and Health in America reports our nation's progress in meeting the target indicators developed by the CDC Healthy People 2010 and provides a state-by-state comparison of progress.

Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana rank in the bottom half of all states for both the flu and pneumovax vaccine.

Based on 2004 data, only about 60 to 65 percent of older adults in these states have received vaccinations compared to the Healthy People 2010 target immunization rate of 90 percent. The immunization rates for minorities are even worse. The report indicates that only 50 percent Hispanics and 43 percent of African-Americans obtain vaccinations for the flu and pneumonia. Additional research is needed as no conclusive factors explain the significant ethnic disparities.

**Effective for older adults**

Although a recent report in Lancet Infectious Diseases (October 2007) indicates flu shots may not be as effective as believed for seniors, this study's authors recommended that while awaiting more conclusive evidence, older adults continue to be immunized.

An article in the Oct. 4, 2007 New England Journal of Medicine indicates that the flu vaccine is highly effective and even cost-saving for older people.

Immunization for disease prevention is one of the scientific miracles available today to prevent illness or reduce its complications. Promoting healthy behaviors for older people and all of us includes educating, motivating and providing immunizations as needed.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides the recommended adult immunization schedule](http://www.cleveland.com/healthfit/index.ssf/2011/07/immunizations_reduce_risk_of_i.html) for the United States. This schedule and extensive footnotes include the recommended age groups and medical indications for routine administration of currently licensed vaccines for adults from Oct. 1, 2006 to September 2007.
These recommendations are approved by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American College of Physicians.

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