

A flu shot can help you enjoy the season

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Older and
WISER
Margaret Coates



Along with the grey skies and damp weather, it's flu and cold season again.

For seniors, the flu season, which occurs in the late fall and winter months, can be a risky time, especially for those whose immune systems are compromised.

It is estimated that between 10 and 20 per cent of the population will contract the flu and it is seniors over 65 who are in one of the higher risk categories, according to the Government of Canada, which reports yearly on the flu season.

The government's website also says that in Canada, an average of 12,200 hospitalizations and 3,500 deaths related to the flu occur each year.

The flu, or influenza, can be worse for people with compromised immune systems. According to HealthLink BC, the provincial health information and advice website found at healthlinkbc.ca/health-feature/flu-season, "Getting sick with the flu can put you at risk of getting other infections.

"These include viral or bacterial pneumonia which affect the lungs. The risk of complications, which can be life-threatening, is greater for seniors 65 years and older, very young children, and people who have lung or heart diseases, certain chronic health conditions, or weakened immune systems."

What is the flu and how do you know you have it?

The flu, according to HealthLink, is an infection of the upper airway affecting the nose, throat and lungs and it is caused by an influenza virus. Symptoms can include fever, fatigue, chills, cough, runny eyes, stuffy nose, sore throat, headache and muscle aches.

How can the flu be prevented?

According to HealthLink, there are seven simple ways that can help you ward off the flu.

These include washing your hands regularly, promptly disposing of used tissues in the waste basket or garbage, coughing and sneezing into your shirt sleeve rather than your hands, staying home when you are ill, keeping your hands away from your face, keeping common surface areas, such as doorknobs, light switches, and keyboards clean and disinfected, eating healthy foods and staying physically active to keep your immune system strong.

Many health care professionals recommend a flu shot as the best means of preventing the flu. The flu shot is recommended for people as a way to ward off the sometimes one to two weeks of illness with all those nasty symptoms I talked about earlier.

It can also be argued that by not getting the flu shot, in addition to you getting sick and possibly negatively affecting your immune system, you're increasing the chances of others getting sick as well.

The more people that are protected against the flu, the less the virus can spread. Some people, such as babies under the age of six months, can't be vaccinated. To minimize their risk of getting sick, you can do your part by getting the flu shot. You won't just be protecting yourself, but you'll also help protect others around you.

I personally didn't highly value the flu shot as I seldom seemed to suffer from the virus, but when I thought about the effect on others, I changed my mind.

Flu vaccines are offered in many locations, including doctor's offices, clinics, health departments, pharmacies, grocery stores, and some seniors centres.

For a list of the nearest clinics you can check out the Vancouver Coastal Health web site at vch.ca/public-health/communicable-diseases-immunizations/flu-shots-flu-clinics or you can call Vancouver Coastal Health at 604-983-6700.

Most flu shots are free for seniors, but for a higher dosage shot that some advisors recommend for seniors, there is a cost of \$75 to \$85 and these shots must be done through a pharmacy or at your doctor's office.

A talk with your doctor or pharmacist will assist you in making your choice of shots or whether you want to get a shot at all.

Let's stay healthy this winter and enjoy the great seasonal activities to come.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 48 years and has worked for and with seniors for 20 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome Email: lions_view@telus.net.

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