Pneumonia: do I need a vaccine?

Pneumonia is caused by an infection in your lungs. It can be very serious, especially if you're older or in poor health. So, for some groups of people, doctors recommend vaccines that help prevent it.

What vaccines work?

Two vaccines may help protect you against pneumonia. One is called the pneumococcal vaccine. The other is the flu vaccine. It may sound strange to have a flu vaccine to prevent pneumonia, but having flu weakens your body. This makes you more likely to get other illnesses, including pneumonia.

Pneumococcal vaccine

There's research to show that the pneumococcal vaccine helps to protect against invasive pneumonia. That's a serious complication where the infection spreads out of your lungs and around your body.

The pneumococcal vaccine is designed to protect against the most common type of pneumonia. The bacteria in the vaccine are dead and can't harm you. The pneumococcal vaccine can't give you pneumonia or any other illness. Your arm may be sore where you have the injection. As a side effect, a few people get a temperature and joint or muscle pains.

Most people need the pneumococcal vaccine only once. You don't need a new one every year. But some people with a weak immune system or problems with their spleen need another vaccination after five years. Ask your doctor if you think this might apply to you.

The flu vaccine

If you get flu, you have a bigger chance of getting pneumonia. So, if you have the flu vaccine, it may also lower your risk of getting pneumonia. There's research to show that older people who live in nursing homes are less likely to get pneumonia if they have a flu jab.

You need to get a new injection every year, usually in October or November.
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The flu vaccine can't give you flu. Your arm may be sore where you have the injection. As a side effect, a few people get a temperature and joint or muscle pains.

Do I need a flu vaccine or pneumococcal vaccine?

The pneumococcal vaccine is recommended if:

- You are 65 or older
- You have a long-term illness, such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease, sickle cell disease, or a problem with your spleen
- You have a lung condition, such as emphysema or severe asthma
- You have had a stroke or 'mini stroke' (transient ischaemic attack)
- You have a weak immune system (for example, if you're getting chemotherapy or steroid treatment, or you have HIV or AIDS)
- You have a cochlear implant (a device put inside your ear to help with hearing loss)
- You have had cerebrospinal fluid leaking, possibly due to an accident or surgery (this fluid surrounds the brain and spine).

There is a different type of pneumococcal vaccine that's recommended for babies. It's usually given in three doses: one at 2 months of age, one at 4 months, and one at 12 to 13 months.

A flu vaccine is recommended each year if:

- You are 65 or older
- You are pregnant
- You live in a nursing home
- You have a long-term illness, such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease, sickle cell disease, Parkinson's disease, or a problem with your spleen
- You have a lung condition, such as emphysema or severe asthma
- You have a weak immune system (for example, if you're getting chemotherapy or steroid treatment, or you have HIV or AIDS)
- You live with or care for someone who could get very ill if they had flu (for example, you work in a nursing home).

It's also important that children over the age of 6 months receive an annual flu vaccination if they have a long-term health condition that could get worse if they catch the flu. The NHS has also started offering an annual flu vaccination to all children aged 2, 3, and 4 years old. This is gradually being expanded to include children aged 2 to 16. This vaccine is given as a nasal spray, not a jab.
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