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 the 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 shot. As a side effect, a few people get a fever and joint or muscle pains.

Most people need the pneumococcal vaccine only once. You don't need a new one every year. But you may need another vaccination if you're over 65 and your first dose was more than five years ago. Some people with a weak immune system or problems with their spleen also need another vaccination. Ask your doctor if you think this may apply to you.

The flu vaccine

If you get the 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 shot.

You need to get a new shot every year, usually in October or November.
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The flu vaccine that's given as a shot contains dead viruses, which can't give you the flu. Your arm may be sore where you have the shot. As a side effect, a few people get a fever and joint or muscle pains.

The flu vaccine is also available as a nasal spray. It contains flu viruses that are alive, but scientists have made them very weak. That way you build up immunity without getting sick. The spray can be given to children aged 2 and older and to adults under age 50. People must be in good health to have this vaccine.

Do I need a flu vaccine or pneumococcal vaccine?

You should have the pneumococcal vaccine if you're 65 or older. You should also have the vaccine if you're age 2 to 64 and:

- You have a long-term health problem, such as diabetes, lung disease, heart disease, liver disease, sickle cell disease, alcoholism, leaks of cerebrospinal fluid (this fluid surrounds the brain and spine) or a cochlear implant (a device put inside your ear to help with hearing loss)
- Your immune system is weak (for example, because of a problem with your spleen, or a disease such as HIV, AIDS, or leukemia)
- Your immune system is affected by treatment that you're having, such as steroids, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy
- You live in a nursing home.

The vaccine is also recommended for adults age 19 to 64 who smoke or have asthma.

There's a different type of pneumococcal vaccine that's recommended for all children under 2 years old. It's usually given in four doses. The first dose is usually given at 2 months.

The flu vaccine is recommended for everyone 6 months and older. It's especially important for:

- Children under age 5, but particularly those under 2 years old
- Pregnant women
- Anyone age 50 or older
- People of any age with certain long-term (chronic) conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- Health care workers
- Anyone who comes in to regular contact with, or looks after, children who are younger than 6 months old (these children are too young to be vaccinated)
- Anyone who has contact with someone who could get serious health problems if they get the flu.