

Patient information from BMJ

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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?

There are two vaccines that can help protect you against pneumonia. One is called the **pneumococcal vaccine**. The other is the **flu vaccine**.

It might 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

The pneumococcal vaccine helps to protect against **invasive pneumonia**, a serious complication where the infection spreads from your lungs to other parts of your body.

The pneumococcal vaccine is designed to protect against the most common type of pneumonia. The vaccine contains bacteria, but these bacteria are dead and can't harm you. The pneumococcal vaccine can't give you pneumonia or any other illness.

The vaccine can cause side effects in some people, such as:

- a sore arm where you had the injection
- a fever, and
- pain in some joints and muscles.

These side effects don't usually last more than a few days.

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.

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The flu vaccine

Having flu makes you more likely to get pneumonia. So, if you have the flu vaccine, it may also reduce your chance of getting pneumonia. For example, research suggests 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.

The flu vaccine can't give you flu. But it can cause similar side effects to those that some people get after the pneumonia jab.

Do I need a flu vaccine or pneumococcal vaccine?

Different countries have different recommendations about who should have these vaccines.

For example, in the UK, the pneumococcal vaccine is recommended if you:

- are 65 or older
- have a long-term illness, such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease, sickle cell disease, or a problem with your spleen
- have a lung condition, such as emphysema or severe asthma
- might be likely to get pneumonia where you work: for example, if you are a healthcare worker
- have a weak immune system (for example, if you're getting chemotherapy or steroid treatment, or you have HIV or AIDS)
- have a cochlear implant (a device put inside your ear to help with hearing loss)
- 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).

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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.

Many countries now offer flu vaccines to children. For example, in the UK, the flu vaccine is offered to children aged between 2 and 16 years old. This vaccine is usually given as a nasal spray, not an injection.

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