

Health Awareness



Spread Cheer, Not the Flu, Throughout the Winter—Put Health First this Season by Getting a Flu Shot

(NAPSA)—The winter season with its many holidays is an important time for families to get together and share traditions among generations. Unfortunately, too often it is also a time to share colds and flu. While hygiene measures, such as covering coughs and sneezes, washing and disinfecting hands and frequently touched surfaces, and limiting contact with others when sick, can help reduce the spread of respiratory illness, when it comes to the flu, the best way to avoid infection is to get a flu shot.

Influenza viruses spread easily from person to person in droplets created when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk—from as far as 6 feet away. In addition, when people get the flu, they can pass the virus on to someone else before they even know they are sick. Flu symptoms typically don't appear until one to four days after the virus enters the body. During this time, people may still spread the virus to others.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends annual influenza vaccination for everyone 6 months of age and older. Since infants younger than 6 months of age cannot receive the flu vaccine, it is especially important for family members and caregivers to get immunized.

Adults 65 and older are also especially vulnerable to the complications of influenza, according to the National Council on Aging (NCOA), whose *Flu + You* initiative is educating seniors and their



families about the risks of influenza and the importance of getting an annual flu shot.

"The NCOA knows how important the holidays are to older adults and their families," said Rick Birkel, PhD, MPA, Senior Vice President of Healthy Aging, Director of the Self-Management Alliance at NCOA. "This is why we are urging families to take steps to help protect themselves from the flu."

No matter how healthy or youthful a senior may feel, the body's immune system, and its ability to fight illness, weakens with age, making them more susceptible to the flu and its complications. In fact, an estimated 60 percent of flu-related hospitalizations each year occur in people 65 years and older. Flu can be especially dangerous for seniors with chronic medical conditions like heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or diabetes. Hospitalizations for these chronic conditions typically also increase during flu season.

"Nationwide, 91 percent of adults 65 years of age and older have at least one chronic condition and 76 percent have two or

more," said Birkel. "So most older adults are not only at increased risk of influenza because of their age, they also have other factors increasing their risk of complications should they contract the flu."

So while washing your hands can be beneficial, take the next step to help protect the whole family by getting a flu shot. It's not too late. The peak of flu season occurs anywhere from late November through March. In fact, as long as influenza viruses are in circulation, even in the spring, it is beneficial to get vaccinated. After immunization, it takes about two weeks for the vaccine to help protect against the virus.

This season, influenza vaccines are plentiful and widely available for all ages. Adults 65 years and older have two vaccine options, says NCOA's Birkel—the traditional flu shot and a higher-dose flu shot developed to address the natural weakening of the immune system that comes with age. Both flu vaccine options are covered in full by Medicare Part B for those 65 years and older with no co-pay and are available across the country at physicians' offices, pharmacies and many other providers.

For more information on the flu vaccine or to find a flu vaccine provider near you visit <http://www.flu.gov>, and for more information on influenza and vaccination specifically for seniors and their caregivers visit www.NCOA.org/Flu.