

Age or chronic conditions make the flu even more dangerous

Another winter means another flu season, and for more vulnerable Canadians, the protection offered by the flu vaccine is especially important.

By D.F. McCourt

As flu season approaches, it's important for Canadians to be aware of just how serious influenza can be, especially for higher-risk populations like older adults and those living with chronic conditions such as asthma. The annual flu vaccine remains our single best tool for protecting vulnerable Canadians from this common virus that can seriously incapacitate or even kill them.

"It's important to understand the seriousness of the flu," says Vanessa Foran, President and CEO of Asthma Canada. "It's estimated that there are over 12,000 hospitalizations and approximately 3,500 deaths from the flu every year in Canada. I don't think enough people realize that."

Those hospitalizations and deaths occur disproportionately in those with additional risk factors like asthma or other chronic conditions including diabetes, heart conditions, and pulmonary disease. In patients of more advanced age, a single hospitalization can be life-changing, leading to deterioration of muscle strength and loss of independence. Roughly half of adults over the age of 65 are already living with two or more chronic conditions—further increasing their chances of experiencing complications from the flu.

"As you age, you become more susceptible to the flu in general," says Foran. "The difficulty for patients with asthma particularly is that the flu can act as a trigger that worsens asthma symptoms, leading to hospitalization and sometimes death. People with asthma are also much more likely to develop pneumonia after having the flu. For seniors especially, it's critical to stay out of the hospital and to maintain their health. The influenza and pneumococcal vaccines are a vital part of the plan for doing this."

Chronic conditions like asthma are common, and the flu can make them much worse

"Flu vaccinations are especially important for the older population—those aged 65 and older—who also have other chronic conditions, because they're at a much higher risk of developing serious complications from the flu," explains Certified Respiratory Educator Stacey McNeilly. "It's imperative that educators reach out to this population specifically to ensure they're receiving the appropriate vaccinations."

McNeilly lives with asthma herself and has firsthand knowledge of how incapacitating infectious diseases like the flu can be. "As someone with asthma, illnesses



Stacey McNeilly photographed at her home in Vancouver, BC. (Photo: Taylor Roades)

like the flu hit me hard," McNeilly says. "I find that I get sicker than someone without asthma would. The cough tends to linger longer, and my recovery is overall slower."

"It's important to understand the seriousness of the flu"

—Vanessa Foran

Immunization is the responsible choice

It only takes one unvaccinated individual to catch the flu and begin spreading it around among those they come into contact with, especially in households. Even among those who are younger and in good health, almost all of us know and come into contact with people in more susceptible categories, especially the elderly. No one wants to be the unwitting factor that causes a potentially deadly illness in someone they care about. That's why communal vigilance is key. "It's all about vaccinating the herd," says Foran. "The more people who get vaccinated, the more protection those with asthma and other conditions have. We want to vaccinate as many people as possible in order to protect the elderly, the very young, and the vulnerable. Getting your flu shot should really be seen as a must, because it protects not just you but the community at large."

For those at increased risk, vaccination should be the first step toward protecting themselves, but not the last one. "With any chronic condition, it's important to have an action plan," says McNeilly. "And that plan

may be different during flu season than it is during the rest of the year. People who are susceptible should be aware of the symptoms to look for and know how to escalate their treatment should their symptoms become serious."

What it all boils down to is understanding the risks that flu season brings, being aware of the tools we have to mitigate these risks, and accepting our duty to protect not only ourselves but our loved ones. Despite decades of education about the value of the influenza vaccine, immunization rates remain below national targets. This is the year. It's time for all adults, especially those who are older or have chronic conditions, to make their health a priority by ensuring that they're immunized.

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