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Welcome to A Cup of Health with CDC, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds

Matthew Reynolds: Each year, influenza, sometimes known as “the flu”, kills an average of 36,000 people in the United States and sends another 200,000 to the hospital. Those most likely to have severe complications from influenza are age 65 and older and children less than 5. With this year's flu season right around the corner, now is the time to start thinking about getting the influenza vaccine, especially if you're age 50 or older or if you have a chronic illness. You should also get a flu vaccine if you live with someone who is at high risk of severe influenza, such as children younger than 5 and adults 65 and older. Getting the vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and people you love from influenza.

CDC also recommends a pneumococcal vaccination for persons 65 and older and those with chronic illnesses. Pneumococcal disease can lead to pneumonia, meningitis, and bacteremia. Both the influenza and pneumococcal vaccines can be given at the same time. So, when you get vaccinated for influenza, make sure you also inquire about pneumococcal vaccination.

The CDC expects that there will be an ample supply of vaccine this year. So, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting the flu should get vaccinated. Despite this good news, CDC remains concerned about overall vaccination rates among seniors. Many seniors are not getting influenza vaccine, and the latest CDC report says that there are wide variations in vaccine rates across the United States and its territories.

Here to discuss that report is Dr. Pascale Wortley of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases.

Welcome to the show, Dr. Wortley.

Dr. Wortley: Thank you very much. It's good to be here.

Matthew Reynolds: Why should people age 65 and older get influenza and pneumococcal vaccines?

Dr. Wortley: Well, people 65 and older are among those who are at high risk of experiencing serious complications from these infections. So, for example, for influenza, people of any age can get influenza, and do, from young children to the elderly and everybody in between. But, of all these people who get influenza every year, they don't all have the same chance of getting a serious complication like pneumonia, for example. Pneumonia can result in a hospitalization; it can also result in death. As you said, about 36,000 deaths occur every year and the majority of these occur in people 65 and over.

Matthew Reynolds: Who else should get these vaccines?

Dr. Wortley: Well, I'm glad you asked, because although this report focuses on people 65 and over, in fact, this vaccine is recommended for a number of groups. All people 50 and over are recommended for receiving this vaccine, as well as infants six months of age to children up to their fifth birthday are recommended. People with chronic diseases like heart disease or lung disease, liver disease or kidney disease, HIV infection, etc., pregnant women, people who live with people who fall into all the groups that I just mentioned also are recommended for vaccination, and finally health care workers. And then I also like to add usually is that everybody who would prefer not to get influenza should get an influenza vaccine.

Now, pneumococcal vaccine, on the other hand, is not recommended for quite as many groups. That vaccine is recommended for people 65 and over and for younger people who have chronic, underlying illnesses like heart or lung disease, kidney or liver disease, HIV infection, etc.

Matthew Reynolds: Well, for all those groups that you've identified, when and how often should they be getting vaccines?

Dr. Wortley: The influenza vaccine unfortunately requires revaccinating every year. And the reason for that is that it's a tricky virus. The virus changes constantly, and therefore, the vaccine has to change to match it. So, every year the vaccine is matched to the strains that are circulating, and that's why it has to be readministered every year.

For pneumococcal vaccine, on the other hand, for most people it's just a once in a lifetime thing, ideally when they turn 65. Now, people who have chronic underlying illnesses may have received it when they were younger and then they should receive it a second time when they turn 65.

Matthew Reynolds: Dr. Wortley, there have been reports of influenza vaccine shortages or delays in past years. What is the supply like this year and are you asking certain people not to be vaccinated?

Dr. Wortley: The good news is that we expect to have plenty of vaccine this year, up to 115 million doses, which is more vaccine than has been manufactured in this country ever. So, everybody who wants to be vaccinated should be able to easily find the opportunity.

Matthew Reynolds: What about seniors who are healthy and active? Some of them may ask, "Do I really need an influenza or pneumococcal vaccine?"

Dr. Wortley: Well, really, again, the vaccine is recommended for all people 50 and over, so we often hear that people 65 and over might feel that it's really just reserved for people older than they are. But, in fact, it's recommended for everybody 50 and over, and, in fact, it's really recommended for people of any age who would just prefer not to

get influenza, because as anybody who has had influenza can attest to, it's a pretty unpleasant illness and something people don't usually want to repeat.

Matthew Reynolds: What would you say to the person who might have concerns about flu vaccine safety?

Dr. Wortley: You know, these are completely safe vaccines. People occasionally might experience a little bit of pain at the site of injection, just like you would for any shot, but they are safe vaccines, and people shouldn't have any concerns about them.

Matthew Reynolds: Well, thanks, Dr. Wortley for talking with us here today.

Dr. Wortley: You're very welcome. Thank you.

Matthew Reynolds: Well, that's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for A Cup of Health with CDC.

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