

A Shot of Prevention

For most people, a rendezvous with a flu virus means a few miserable days of fever, sore throat, headaches, muscle aches and coughing. For others, flu could mean hospitalization and even death.

Elderly residents of long-term care homes are part of that second, high-risk group. It's important for residents and families to understand why this is, and what can be done.

First, the flu virus spreads rapidly and easily through the air, from one person to another. This is why doctors usually recommend that someone with the flu stay home to avoid exposing others. As anyone knows who has children in school, a large number of people living under one roof means easier spread of infection, in spite of the infection controls that are in place.

Second, virus infections cannot be cured with antibiotics. Some of the uncomfortable symptoms can be treated, but there is no cure for flu. People must wait for their own immune systems to build up antibodies to the virus so that they can fight back.

Third, nursing home residents are at high risk because the immune systems of the elderly are much frailer and less efficient than those of younger people. Therefore, residents are less able to resist infection, and as a result, are more likely to have serious complications, like pneumonia.

That's why Extendicare treats influenza so seriously, and why health care professionals everywhere work so hard to raise people's awareness of the importance of getting *annual* flu vaccinations in the fall.

Some immunizations, such as tetanus shot, last for many years. That's not true of flu immunizations because each year, the *type* of virus changes. As a result, last year's flu shot won't help a person fight this year's strain of virus. Scientists study the types of flu that occur in countries in the southern hemisphere where winter starts earlier than it does here. They then predict the strain of virus that will likely occur in Canada, and a new vaccine is produced to fight it. However, it can still happen that a person becomes ill from a virus other than what is in the current year's vaccine.

A vaccine is made of a flu virus that has been processed so it won't actually cause the flu. Instead, it triggers your immune system to recognize and therefore fight an infection if you are exposed to the virus.

Some people experience minor side effects such as redness at the site of the injection. A small number of people may experience two or three days of minor aches and pains.

Aside from our strict infection control practices, Extendicare has comprehensive immunization policies and procedures to prevent the spread of influenza in our homes. Before each long-term care resident is vaccinated, the resident's physician or the long-term care home's consulting physician will check to ensure that there is no known medical reason to prevent the person from getting the vaccine. While the decision to have a flu shot is voluntary, we at Extendicare strongly recommend it, and we encourage the resident or family member to give the doctor consent to have the vaccine administered.

If you would like more information about the influenza vaccinations, or about our preventative care program, please talk to your director of care.