

Adults need shots, too: Find out which vaccines are important for heart health

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While most parents are good at keeping track of vaccines kids need to stay healthy, many people don't realize there are immunizations important to keeping adults heart-healthy, as well. The American Heart

Association urges all adults, especially those already with a history of heart disease or stroke, to take a look at their immunization status, and stay up-to-date on preventive vaccines, particularly for flu and COVID-19.

- **Influenza/Flu**—Flu season begins in early fall and extends into early spring. Many people may experience just a few days of aches and chills, but the flu can be deadly for some, including the very young, people who are older and those with chronic health conditions like [heart disease](#), stroke and diabetes. There has been some research linking flu infection to cardiovascular disease (CVD). Getting a flu shot can not only prevent the flu, it may also reduce the risk of have a [heart attack](#) or stroke.
 - A [study published earlier this year](#) in the journal *Stroke* found that among a group of people hospitalized for various reasons, those who experienced a flu-like illness within a month of their hospitalization were 38% more likely to have a stroke, compared to those who didn't have a similar illness. Receiving a flu vaccine within the year prior to hospitalization lowered a person's stroke risk to 11%.
 - People over the age of 50 who were hospitalized and those in nursing homes who were at high risk for influenza had lower rates of death, heart attack, mini-stroke and [cardiac arrest](#) if they were vaccinated against flu, according to a study presented at the American Heart Association's Basic Cardiovascular Sciences 2020 meeting.
 - And a [study published](#) in the American Heart Association's flagship journal *Circulation* found that people living with heart failure who got an annual flu shot had an 18% lower chance of dying from CVD or any other cause, compared to those who did not get a flu shot.

"Getting an annual [flu shot](#) should be part of routine health care for all individuals and especially for people who are already living with [chronic health conditions](#) that put them at higher risk for heart attacks or strokes," said Eduardo Sanchez, M.D., M.P.H., FAHA, American Heart Association chief medical officer for prevention. "The potentially serious complications of the flu are far, far greater for those with chronic diseases. This is true not just for [older people](#) but even those age 50 and younger who have a history of high blood pressure, heart disease or diabetes. Most adults can get a [flu vaccine](#) at no out-of-pocket cost at a local pharmacy or through their local health department."

- **COVID-19**—The American Heart Association established the COVID-19 Cardiovascular Disease Registry at the onset of the pandemic and the registry has produced a number of studies reporting that people with or at risk for cardiovascular disease were more likely to become infected with and die from COVID-19. Additionally, the research has found many people are experiencing new heart and vascular disease after they get COVID-19.
 - A [study](#) from the registry and published earlier this month in the journal *Circulation: Arrhythmia and Electrophysiology* found new-onset atrial fibrillation (AFib) in 1 in 20 patients hospitalized with COVID-19.
 - [Research](#) from the registry presented at the American Heart Association's International Stroke Conference earlier this year found that people hospitalized with COVID-19 had a higher risk of stroke, compared with people who had similar infectious conditions such as influenza or sepsis.
 - A [study](#) published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* in February 2021 found that obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and [heart failure](#)—all risk factors related to CVD—were four of the top risks for

COVID-19 complications.

"We can't stress enough the connections between COVID-19 and cardiovascular disease. There is clear evidence that people who have heart and vascular disease and even those with CVD risk factors are more likely to get COVID and to have more severe complications from the virus. We also know that COVID is not just a respiratory disease, it can cause heart-related diseases and blood clotting issues in people who have never had those before.," Sanchez said. "We urge everyone who is eligible to get the vaccine and all recommended boosters. The side effects of the vaccine have proven to be minimal and far outweigh the greater risk of getting COVID."

While flu and COVID-19 vaccines are of the utmost importance, there are also several other immunizations that can help keep people heart-healthy.

The pneumococcal vaccination protects against a common cause of severe pneumonia and is especially important in people 65 and older and others with certain underlying medical conditions. This type of pneumonia can be deadly, especially for people already at high risk for health complications, including CVD. One shot is usually good for several years, although depending on how old you are when you get your first shot, you may need a second one later.

Shingles, a viral infection caused by the chickenpox virus, has been linked to an increased risk of stroke. More than 99% of people aged 40 or older in the United States may carry the dormant chickenpox virus, also known as the varicella-zoster virus, and not even realize it. A study presented at the American Heart Association's International Stroke Conference in 2021 found that the shingles vaccine may reduce stroke risk by about 16% in older adults.

There is also research that links human papillomavirus, or HPV, a common sexually transmitted infection, to cardiovascular disease. A 2019 [study](#) published in the journal *Circulation Research* found that Korean women infected with high-risk strains of HPV were 22% more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke than women not infected with the virus. While this vaccine is not currently among those recommended by the Association for cardiovascular benefits, the research points to growing evidence about the connections between viral infections and [cardiovascular disease](#).

"There is still much to learn about how infection and inflammation can impact the cardiovascular and cerebrovascular systems of the body. What we do know is that preventive care, including regular immunizations as appropriate, can save lives," Sanchez said. "And even if you don't think you are at high risk for infectious diseases such as the flu or COVID-19, it's important to think about others you come in contact with who are at risk—your older relatives, your young children, people in your family with a history of heart disease and [stroke](#). By getting vaccinated yourself, you can reduce the spread of these deadly infections to others."

More information: Learn more about important immunizations and other preventive health tips at heart.org.

Provided by American Heart Association

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