



Healthy aging through immunization

By D.F. McCourt

With Canadians living longer than ever before, healthy aging is of primary importance – and vaccination is a crucial piece of the puzzle.

Canada's aging population is very interested in personal health, and for good reason. If we want to enjoy the benefits of a longer life, we must remain fit, active, and independent. We pay close attention to diet and exercise. We monitor perhaps a little too closely the latest news on things suspected of causing or protecting against cancer. And we visit our health care providers like clockwork. But there's one conversation we're not having in the doctor's office nearly as often as we should if we truly want to age gracefully in good health – the conversation about vaccines.

We're, on the whole, well-informed and conscientious in this country when it comes to childhood vaccines, but awareness is much lower on the importance of adult immunization. "When we talk about vaccines and healthy aging, the first important thing to remember is that it's vaccines that allow us to age at all," says Dr. Allison McGeer, Director of Infection Prevention and Control at Mount Sinai Hospital. "The things that we vaccinate people against are things that can kill older adults. So vaccines simply help you live longer. The second thing to remember is that they help you live better as you age. For some diseases, like shingles, it's about not enduring the suffering. For other diseases, it's about not putting yourself in the position of being knocked back by something you can't fully recover from."

The older we get, the slower we bounce back

The truth is that, as we age, every illness becomes more dangerous, and recovery becomes more difficult and less certain. "As we get older, all of our systems stop working quite as well," says Dr. Ian Gemmill, a consultant in public health medicine. "Our immune system is no different. It still works, just not as robustly. So something like an episode of influenza can knock us out for longer, put us in the hospital, or even kill us."

In addition to the yearly flu vaccine, immunization is recommended Canada-wide for all adults against pertussis (whooping cough) and tetanus. For older adults specifically, vaccines against shingles and pneumococcal disease are recommended. Hepatitis A and B immunization may also be recommended for those at higher risk. "Generally speaking, the overall recommendations for vaccines are pretty much the same across all the provinces," says Dr. McGeer. "The big difference is not in the recommendations, but in the funding."

Inform yourself so you can be proactive about your health

Because not every province covers all the recommended vaccines under their public plans, it's up to you to inform yourself about which are paid for in your province, and which might be covered under any private insurance you may have. Educating yourself about these vaccines is the first step to protecting your health as you age. "There are vaccines out there that people may not even be aware of that could make a difference in their lives," says Dr. Gemmill. "It's up to each individual to educate themselves and decide if there are vaccines they could benefit from."

Your best resource for healthy aging, of course, is your primary health care provider. Don't let the vaccine conversation stay on the back burner forever. "Every time you go to your family doctor, you should be checking in to see if your vaccines are up-to-date," says Dr. McGeer. "Sometime between the ages of 50 and 60, you should sit down with your physician and lay out a plan for which vaccines you should get and when you should get them."