Despite the Hoopla, Vaccines Should Be in Reach This Cough-and-Cold Season

People under 65 without underlying health conditions should still be able to get a COVID vaccine after a discussion with a provider.

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For people whose autumn agenda includes getting vaccinated against respiratory diseases — COVID, flu, and, for some, RSV — this year may be surprisingly routine.

Following several confusing months this summer when federal officials announced and then retreated from changes to COVID vaccine recommendations, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on October 6 announced updated fall immunization schedules that are not that different from last year's. That should clear the way for most people who want shots this fall to get them, public health experts say.

"From a patient's experience, there shouldn't be anything different from what they've experienced in the past, except maybe they'll get a little more information from the pharmacist," said Hannah Fish, senior director of strategic initiatives at the National Community Pharmacists Association.

Here's what you need to know:

COVID Vaccine

This fall, the COVID vaccine is recommended for everyone 6 months or older, with one caveat. People need to have a conversation with their provider first, a model called "shared clinical decision-making." Providers can be doctors, pharmacists, or the health professionals giving the shots.

For people younger than 65, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices emphasized that vaccination is generally more beneficial for those who are at higher risk for severe COVID.

Although the shots are recommended for the same age range as last year, there are a few

possible wrinkles. Even though the CDC's approval is broad and means that health plans have to cover the shot without charging consumers for it, some providers may balk at giving the vaccine to people under 65 unless they have an underlying condition that puts them at risk for severe COVID if they get infected. That's what the Food and Drug Administration's label for the COVID vaccine advises.

"It's a nuance that could occur in an interaction between a provider and a patient," said Jen Kates, a senior vice president and the director of global and public health policy at KFF, a health information nonprofit that includes KFF Health News.

However, if a provider refused to administer the shot to a healthy person because doing so would be "off-label," another provider would probably be willing to give someone the jab, experts said.

"They could go to a different pharmacy," Kates said.

Many states have stepped in to ensure that people can get vaccines if they want them, according to a KFF analysis. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have adopted recommendations that are broader than those of the federal government, Kates said.

However, the percentage of people opting to get the COVID vaccine continues to drop. At the end of April, 23% of adults said they had received the current vaccine, according to the CDC.

With uptake so low, fewer pharmacies and doctors may choose to stock the shot this year, said Jeff Levin-Scherz, a primary care doctor who is the population health leader for the management consultancy WTW and an assistant professor at Harvard's Chan School of Public Health.

Large chains, including CVS and Walgreens, say they have enough supply available to meet demand.

The additional hoops people might have to go through — such as having to find a different pharmacy or physician — could have an impact on uptake of the covid shot, though.

"To get more people to get vaccines, the key is making vaccination really easy and to take steps out," Levin-Scherz said.

Influenza Vaccine

More people seek out the flu vaccine than the COVID vaccine, but even so, only 47% of adults got a shot last flu season.

The CDC recommends that virtually everyone 6 months or older get a flu shot annually. This year is no different. The shots should be widely available at pharmacies and physician offices, and health plans will cover the shots without charging people for them.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services announced in July that flu vaccines must not contain thimerosal, a preservative that prevents bacterial growth in vaccines. There is no

evidence that the mercury-based additive, which has been used for decades, is harmful, according to vaccine researchers. Last year, the CDC estimated that only 6% of flu vaccines use thimerosal as a preservative.

RSV Vaccine

This vaccine protects against respiratory syncytial virus, a highly contagious seasonal virus that infects the lungs and respiratory tract. Although symptoms are typically mild, RSV can lead to serious lung infections, particularly in older people.

A vaccine was approved in 2023. The CDC recommends it for everyone 75 or older and for people 50 to 74 who have medical conditions that put them at risk for severe disease.

People who meet the criteria should be able to get the RSV vaccine at their local pharmacy, Fish said.

The RSV vaccine is not an annual vaccine. If you've already received it, you don't need to get it again, according to current guidelines.

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