

Why seniors need flu shots

BY SHERIE E. HISER

Flu season is here and it's important to understand the impact of getting the flu shot for men and women age 65 and older. Regardless of how healthy you are, your immune system weakens with age. People over the age of 65 are at greater risk of serious flu complications, such as pneumococcal pneumonia, and have the greatest potential of severe flu disease.

In fact, the flu can be fatal, especially to seniors; per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 71 to 85 percent of flu-related deaths and 54 to 70 percent of flu-related hospitalizations occur in people age 65 and older. However, flu vaccines have been shown to be approximately 80 percent effective in preventing flu-related death among seniors.

The peak season for the flu is January and February, so it is essential that you get your flu shot early to ensure maximum immunity to the flu virus. Influenza, or the flu, is highly contagious and knows no boundaries, so annual vaccination is the best way to protect yourself from the flu and build up your immunity.

Did you know there are different strengths of flu shots? Aging decreases the body's response to vaccination, lessening the effectiveness of the standard-strength flu vaccine for an older adult.

There are various flu shots available for different age groups, and it is important you are aware that senior flu shots are available for older adults.

Senior flu shots are specially formulated for adults 65 and older with higher-strength flu vaccines that can help provide strong flu protection.

If you're worried about getting the flu from the shot, don't be — the flu vaccine cannot cause the flu, but some people do experience side effects. These are generally mild and go away on their own within a few days. Common side effects include soreness, redness and/or swelling from the shot, headache, fever, nausea and/or muscle aches.

In addition to getting your flu shot, don't forget to practice good health habits, such as covering your mouth when you cough, washing your hands often (also helps prevent the spread of infection) and avoiding people who are sick.

Also, if you are 65 and older, you should keep up-to-date with your pneumococcal vaccination to protect against pneumonia (complication of the flu), meningitis and bloodstream infections.

If you do develop flu symptoms, seek medical advice quickly to be evaluated for whether the treatment with an antiviral drug would be effective.

The CDC recommends that antiviral drugs be used as early as possible to treat flu in people who are very sick and have a greater chance of getting serious flu complications, like people 65 and older.

As a reminder, flu symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people may also have vomiting and diarrhea.

You may also be infected with the flu and have respiratory symptoms without a fever.

SHERIE. HISER is the infection prevention and control nurse for the Sheridan Veterans Affairs Health Care System.

Experts tell Congress how to cut drug prices. We give you some odds.

BY SARAH JANE TRIBBLE

KAISER HEALTH NEWS VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The nation's most influential science advisory group was set to tell Congress on Tuesday that the U.S. pharmaceutical market is not sustainable and needs to change.

"Drugs that are not affordable are of little value and drugs that do not exist are of no value," said Norman Augustine, chair of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's committee on drug pricing and former CEO of Lockheed Martin Corp.

The report, "Making Medicines Affordable: A National Imperative," identifies eight steps to cut drug prices. It also provides a list of specific "implementation actions" for various federal agencies, including Congress, the Federal Trade Commission and the U.S. Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services.

Tuesday's hearing, which is the third in a series by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, comes as Americans across the political spectrum say lowering the price of prescription drugs is a top priority. Nationwide, dozens of cities, counties and school districts have turned to drug importation as a solution to high prices. And legislators from both parties have also supported importation of drugs from countries where list prices are cheaper. While individual states have passed laws for more transparency and price controls and President Donald Trump has publicly called for lower drug prices, Congress has stalled. So, will the committee's recommendations spur action? Kaiser Health News took the political temperature, talked to experts and rated their chances:

Recommendation No. 1: Allow the federal government to negotiate drug prices

Current law prohibits the U.S. Health and Human Services secretary from directly negotiating drug prices, and the committee says that's ridiculous.

The committee recommends Medicare and other agencies negotiate which drugs are placed on a list of covered drugs and, when necessary, exclude some drugs. This is not a new idea.

Some states are already restricting high-priced drugs in Medicaid, the state-federal insurance program for low-income Americans. But federal efforts to change Medicare are more complicated.

Just two months ago, top House Democrats introduced another Medicare negotiation bill. But don't hold your breath, Trump hasn't responded to multiple letters sent from Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md. — including one after the most recent bill was introduced in late October. That bill hasn't moved past the health subcommittee.

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Recommendation No. 2: Speed approvals of safe and effective generics and biosimilars

This recommendation has a strong ally at the Food and Drug Administration.

Commissioner Scott Gottlieb announced a "drug competition action plan" in June and followed it up two months ago with



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a new set of policies aimed at speeding the drug approval process for complex generics. More changes are expected, too, as Gottlieb wrote in his blog post: "If consumers are priced out of the drugs they need, that's a public health concern that FDA should address."

But the pharmaceutical world knows which games to play to keep competition at bay. The committee specifically recommends the U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission should watch for anti-competitive tactics, such as pay-for-delay and extending exclusivity protections. The U.S. Supreme Court weighed in on pay-for-delay, saying settlements between brand-name drugmakers and generic rivals warranted antitrust review. The total number of these deals has fallen in recent years.

To further encourage generic approvals, Congress could include several proposed bills, such as the so-called CREATES Act, in a final year-end package, said Chip Davis, president of the generics and biosimilars lobby Association for Accessible Medicines.

"People are starting to pay more attention" to anti-competitive patent tactics, Davis said.

Recommendation No. 3: Transparency
The committee takes direct aim at drug prices by saying that Congress should make manufacturers and insurers disclose drug prices, as well as the rebates and discounts they negotiate. It also asks that HHS curate and publicly report the information.

States have taken the lead on price transparency, with Vermont the first to pass a law, which requires an annual report on up to 15 drugs that cost the state a lot of money and have seen price spikes. In Congress, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., introduced a bill in June that would impose price-reporting requirements on some drugs. It now sits in the Senate Finance Committee. The pharmaceutical

industry has fended off most price disclosure efforts in the past.

Notably, the committee also recommends that nonprofits in the pharmaceutical sector — such as patient groups — disclose all sources of income in their tax filings. That's a move that would reveal exactly how much the pharmaceutical companies are supporting advocacy groups.

Recommendation No. 4: Discourage the pharmaceutical industry's direct-to-consumer advertising

The U.S. is only one of two developed countries in the world to allow direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising (the other is New Zealand, and doctors there have called for a ban). And U.S. taxpayers support the tax breaks with a deduction that politicians have tried to eliminate in the past.

Now, the committee recommends Congress eliminate the tax deduction pharmaceutical companies are allowed to take on direct-to-consumer advertising.

This is an idea that should have wide support. Polls show that most Americans favor banning the ads and federal lawmakers have tried to change the rules on so-called DTC for years. The American Medical Association called for a ban on pharmaceutical advertising directly to patients in 2015, saying there were concerns that the ads were driving up demand for expensive drugs. The FDA provides guidance for the advertising and, in August, FDA Commissioner Gottlieb said he may reduce the number of risks manufacturers must reveal when advertising a medicine.

In a sign of just how entrenched the tax break is in D.C. politics, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., introduced a bill last month that doesn't eliminate the break but takes a step to rein in the advertising. Durbin's bill would require manufacturers to provide the wholesale price of a drug in their advertisements.

SENIOR HAPPENINGS |

• A Christmas wrapping station is available in The

Hub on Smith's art studio. The station is complete with

everything to get the job done. The station is available Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. with the exception of class times.

• Thursday, the fun department at The Hub on Smith will takes it "on the road" to

the Big Horn meal site location (the Big Horn Woman's Club). Lunch is served at 11:30 a.m. and must be ordered the day before or earlier by calling Holli at (307) 672-6079.

• Don't think you need

estate planning? If you own anything, how would you want your things distributed when you're not around? Does your family know? Avoid chaos for your family by planning. Join attorney Tim Tarver on Tuesday,

Jan. 2, at 5:30 p.m. at The Hub on Smith for a free community presentation on wills and trusts. A light dinner will be available. No need to call ahead. The Hub on Smith is located at 211 Smith St.



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