TuSalud

Doctors Regularly Miss Chances to Administer Flu Vaccines to Older Patients

Black and Latino people on Medicare are less likely than their white counterparts to receive flu vaccinations.

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The annual flu season causes significant illness and death among older Americans. Although health care providers can inform their patients about flu vaccines, many are missing opportunities to vaccinate elderly patients with high-risk conditions against this contagious viral infection, according to study findings published in the Annals of Internal Medicine.

On average, about 8% of people living in the United States develop the flu each season, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In addition, individuals age 65 and older with certain chronic medical conditions, such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease, have an especially high risk for complications if they become sick with the flu.

For the study, CDC researchers wanted to determine the proportion of those eligible to get a flu shot who received the vaccine during a specific period and factors linked with doctors missing chances to administer these vaccinations.

Investigators reviewed the Medicare claims of 31.6 million adults age 19 or older with Medicare Parts A and B throughout the 2018 to 2019 flu season. Of individuals enrolled in Medicare, 31.6% were ages 19 to 64 and 54% were age 65 and older.

Results showed that among people on Medicare who received flu vaccinations, 52.9% were white, 34.9% were Black and 30.4% were Latino. In addition, 56.1% of those on Medicare with high-risk conditions were vaccinated, compared with 27.6% of those without such illnesses.

Among those who were not vaccinated, 77.4% visited a doctor during flu season. Those with high-risk conditions (91%) and those without (43%) saw a physician at least once. Scientists noted that 44.2% of patients experienced missed opportunities to get a flu shot; 59.1% of these were classified as non-high-risk patients and 42.2% were classified as high-risk.

Additionally, the number of vaccinations were lower and the percentage of missed chances higher

among younger patients, Black and Latino patients, individuals with no high-risk conditions or those eligible to receive both Medicare and Medicaid.

“Many Medicare beneficiaries are at higher risk for severe influenza-associated complications due to age or underlying medical conditions, so it is especially important that these patients get an influenza vaccine,” said Bo-Hyun Cho, PhD, a CDC health economist and the lead author of the study. “Health care providers can play a key role by making a strong recommendation and helping communicate with their patients about the importance of influenza vaccination.”

Clinicians should follow up with their patients during subsequent appointments “to ensure they have the information they need to make informed decisions about vaccinations,” Cho advised.

Several years ago, in a collaboration between the Office of Evaluation Sciences and the Department of Health and Human Services, researchers conducted a study showing that letters sent to Medicare beneficiaries resulted in more individuals getting a flu shot.

Researchers suggested that clinicians employ similar sustained population-specific messaging to overcome barriers and increase vaccination rates among at-risk populations during routine appointments. In addition, pharmacies could also help to narrow the gap because many patients who are not high-risk get their flu vaccine at a pharmacy, researchers said.

To learn more about the flu vaccine and how to minimize your risk of becoming ill, read “I got this year’s flu shot. Am I protected or can I still get the flu?”

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