Vaccines: A Shield for You and Your Family

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Winter brings freezing temperatures and snow on the ground – the last thing we need is to also get sick! Yet this time of year also coincides with the flu and respiratory season. One way to help ensure we don't get sick is by making sure you and your loved ones are vaccinated for preventable diseases.

First and foremost, vaccines protect you, your family, your friends, and your coworkers. They offer additional benefits that extend beyond simply helping you stay healthy. When vaccines prevent illness or make it less severe, you can stay healthy, avoid expensive medical care, keep working, continue providing care for family members or friends, and participate in your community.

When many people are vaccinated, preventable diseases are less likely to spread to other people and those who are more vulnerable are better protected too. The health care system also experiences less strain. In this way, the benefits of vaccination extend outward—from each person to their family, neighborhood, and broader community.

Health Benefits of Vaccines

How exactly do vaccines work to protect you? They work by training your immune system to recognize harmful germs so it can respond quickly and prevent illness. After you get a vaccine, your body creates a "memory" of the germ, which helps protect you if you are exposed to it in the future. Because vaccines usually contain germs that are dead or weakened, they cannot cause illness in healthy people, and still give strong protection.

We live much longer today than we did in the early 1900s thanks to childhood vaccines, which greatly reduced deaths from diseases like diphtheria, measles, and polio. Today, as people live longer, vaccines are important not only for children but also for adults—and especially older adults who are at higher risk for infections.

Respiratory infections are also a major concern. Influenza (the flu), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and pneumococcal disease cause many hospitalizations and deaths in people over age 65. Vaccines for these illnesses are available and help reduce severe disease, prevent hospital stays, and help us all stay independent for longer.

Pneumococcal disease is a serious bacterial infection that can cause pneumonia, meningitis, and other infections in the bloodstream. It affects older adults and people with long-term health problems more often than younger adults. The flu remains a major cause of preventable death each year, and RSV—often thought of as a childhood illness—can also cause severe lung disease, particularly in older adults. These infections can often be prevented or made less serious through vaccination. You can learn about which vaccines you or your family are recommended to get any age by going to https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/by-age/index.html.



Staying up to date on recommended vaccines is a simple, effective way to protect your health and independence as you age. *Editorial photo licensed via AdobeStock*

Economic Benefits of Vaccines

Vaccines don't just protect you from getting sick—they also save money for you and for society. Many studies show that vaccination programs are one of the best investments in public health. For every $1 spent on childhood vaccines, the country saves about $11 in medical costs and lost work time. A major CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) study found that vaccinating children born between 1994 and 2023 saved:

- $540 billion in medical costs (such as doctor visits and hospital stays)
- $2.7 trillion in overall economic benefits

These savings come from preventing hospitalizations, reducing the spread of disease, avoiding long-term disabilities, and allowing people to keep working rather than caring for sick children or family members.

Vaccines also help avoid the high costs of disease outbreaks. For example:

- Annual routine vaccines from 1994–2023 prevented 32 million hospitalizations and over 1 million deaths.
- When measles outbreaks occur, they are extremely expensive. The 2025 measles outbreak in Texas

cost about $4.5 million for medical care and public health response. And investigating just one measles case can cost $30,000 to $50,000. for medical care and public health response. And investigating just one measles case can cost $30,000 to $50,000.

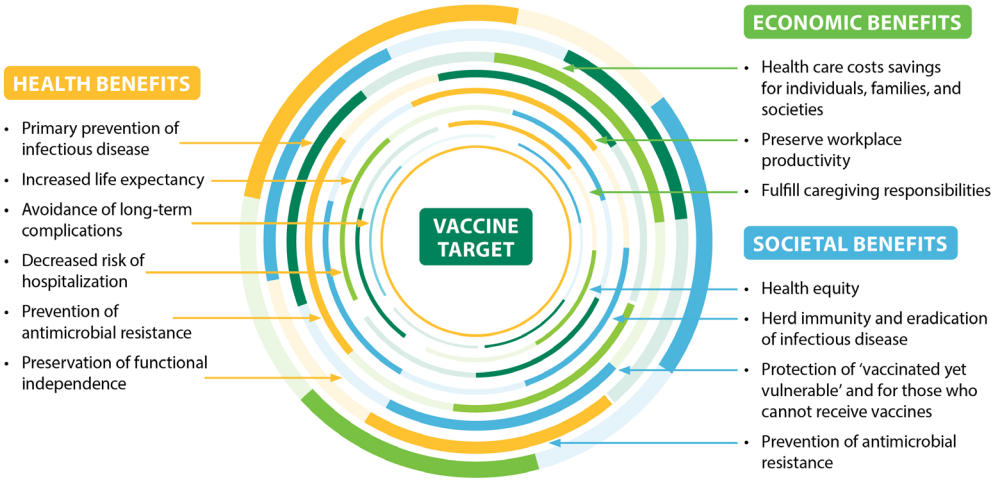
Vaccines also help businesses and workers by reducing sick days and keeping people healthier. For example:

- The flu causes about 17 million missed workdays every year.
- Widespread flu vaccination can cut that number in half.

This means fewer disruptions at work, less need to find staff replacements, and smoother business operations.

Vaccines also indirectly support people who care for family members. About 20% of U.S. adults provide short or long-term care or assistance to a family member or friend, and around 4.5 million are in the "sandwich generation," caring for both children and aging parents. When fewer people get sick, caregivers have fewer disruptions and can stay in the workforce. This is especially important for women, who make up most caregivers and risk losing income or decreasing retirement savings when they have to miss work.

GSA Concentric Value of Vaccination as We Age



Graphic provided by GSA

How Vaccines Get Approved in the United States

Before a vaccine can be used in the U.S., it has to go through a long, careful process to make sure it is safe, works well, and is made correctly. Here is the process for how vaccines are developed and approved:

- Scientists research and discover possible vaccine ideas.
- Early laboratory work shows whether the idea might work.
- Tests in labs and in animals check safety and whether the vaccine triggers an immune response.
- Studies in people (also known as clinical trials) test safety, side effects, and how well the vaccine works.
- The government reviews all the data and decides whether to approve the vaccine.
- Public health experts recommend how the vaccine should be used.
- Safety continues to be monitored after the vaccine is available to the public.

Societal Benefits of Vaccines

Vaccines help more than just the people who get them—they strengthen the health, stability, and well-being of your whole community. By preventing illness, they protect people who get sick easily or have weak immune systems, reduce the spread of preventable disease, and help support families, workplaces, and the economy.

When enough people in a community are vaccinated, a preventable and contagious disease has a much harder time spreading. This is called community immunity (or herd immunity). It is especially important for:

- People who cannot get vaccinated for medical or other reasons
- People whose immune systems don't respond strongly to vaccines (such as many older adults)

Because some older adults have weaker immune responses and may have chronic health conditions, they benefit greatly when those around them are vaccinated. High vaccination coverage helps older adults stay independent and reduces the need for a hospital stay or care in a nursing home or rehabilitation center.

When we stay healthy, we can continue:

- Working
- Caring for family members and friends
- Volunteering
- Participating in social and community life

Vaccines help prevent the illnesses that disrupt these roles, making our communities stronger and more connected across generations.

Despite the health, economic, and societal benefits of vaccines, there have been recent drops in vaccination rates that put our hard-won progress at risk, increasing the chance of preventable disease outbreaks. To protect these gains here are things that you can do:

- Educate yourself and your community about the safety and effectiveness of vaccines.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about which vaccines you need at your next appointment.

Vaccines are essential for a healthy society. They protect vulnerable individuals, reduce the spread of disease, and help people remain active in their families and communities. As one of the greatest achievements in public health, vaccines have dramatically lowered illness and death from diseases such as smallpox, polio, rabies, and common childhood illnesses. Effective for people of all ages, vaccines provide benefits that go beyond individual health: they save money by preventing costly illnesses and strengthen society by keeping people in the workforce, caring for their families, and engaging in their communities. With such wide-reaching health, economic, and social impacts, vaccines create value for everyone. They help you, your family, your workplace, and your community thrive.

To find a pharmacy near you that provides vaccines, go to https://vaccinefinder.org/

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