



Jay A. Gold, MD, JD, MPH

Immunization season: For more than just flu

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Influenza season is upon us, and now is the time to immunize your patients who are at risk. And providing influenza immunizations is a perfect time to make sure your patients are also up-to-date on their pneumococcal and hepatitis B vaccinations.

Medicare covers the cost of pneumococcal and influenza vaccine and their administration by recognized professionals. No beneficiary coinsurance or co-payment applies, and beneficiaries do not have to meet their deductibles to receive an influenza or pneumococcal immunization. Medicare also covers hepatitis B vaccination for persons at high or intermediate risk. The coinsurance or co-payment applies for hepatitis B vaccination after the yearly deductible has been met.

Despite Medicare coverage, rates for these immunizations among Medicare beneficiaries are not optimal. Medicare survey data indicate that, in 2004, there was a 73% influenza vaccination rate for facility- and community-dwelling Medicare beneficiaries, and that only 67% of eligible patients had

received a pneumococcal vaccination. Furthermore, dialysis patients remain underimmunized.

Home health patients provide a particular opportunity for immunizing those who otherwise would not be vaccinated. A recent survey conducted by MetaStar indicates that 60 of the 101 responding home health agencies provide an influenza immunization assessment, and either provide influenza immunization or offer a referral for it. The influenza immunization rate in these home health agencies is 59.4%. Pneumococcal assessment and immunization or referral is 43.6% for the agencies.

Why Immunize Adults?

The National Center for Health Statistics reported influenza and pneumococcal disease to be the primary causes of death for more than 57,000 older adults in 2003. Pneumococcal disease occurs year round and accounts for approximately 40,000 cases of invasive disease per year in the United States. For all persons age 65 or older, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) and other leading authorities recommend lifetime vaccination against pneumococcal disease and annual vaccination against influenza. Medicare will cover a booster pneumococcal vaccine for high-risk persons if 5 years have passed since their last vaccination.

What's New?

Nursing home residents are especially vulnerable to influenza and pneumonia and their complications. As of September 1, 2006, influenza and pneumococcal vaccination assessments are included as part of CMS's Minimum Data Set (MDS) for nursing homes. Newly-enrolled Medicare beneficiaries are covered for an initial physical examination—the “Welcome to Medicare” visit—which includes pneumococcal and influenza immunization. Physicians can be paid for injections and immunizations administered to people covered by Medicare, even when administered during a visit that includes other Medicare-covered services.

Furthermore, hospitals, long-term care facilities, and home health agencies participating in Medicare and Medicaid programs have, for several years, been able to administer influenza and pneumococcal vaccinations according to a standing orders protocol without the need for a physician's examination or direct order.

MetaStar has been working to increase immunization rates in Wisconsin hospitals, physicians' offices, nursing homes, and home health care settings.

For Further Information

Your reminders to your patients, health care employees, family

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Doctor Gold is senior vice president and principal clinical coordinator for MetaStar, Inc. This material was prepared by MetaStar, Inc., the Quality Improvement Organization for Wisconsin, under a contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). The contents presented do not necessarily reflect CMS policy.

members, friends, and co-workers to get up-to-date on their vaccinations is the single most important thing you can do to increase immunization rates. Since Medicare provides coverage of these important immunizations, it is especially important to make sure that those patients have received their lifetime pneumococcal immunization, have been assessed for their risk for hepatitis B, and have an appointment to obtain their influenza vaccination each fall.

For more information about Medicare's adult immunization benefits, billing Medicare for vaccinations, and other helpful information, visit the CMS Web site: http://www.cms.hhs.gov/AdultImmunizations/01_Overview.asp.

A variety of educational products and resources to help health care professionals and their staff become familiar with coverage, coding, billing, and reimbursement for all preventive services covered by Medicare are available at the MLN Preventive Services Educational Products Web located at www.cms.hhs.gov/MLNProducts/35_PreventiveServices.asp on the CMS Web site.

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