



International
Federation on
Ageing

Bringing the Voices of Canadian Seniors Together in the Fight Against Influenza -

Policy Brief

February 2022

Background

Influenza in Canada is one of the top ten causes of hospitalization and deathⁱ. Despite common misconceptions, healthy people of all ages can often have severe febrile illness from seasonal influenzaⁱⁱ. There is, however, a growing proportion of the general population such as older persons, people with underlying health conditions and those with lifestyle risk factors such as drinking and smoking that are especially at risk of serious complications, an exacerbation of underlying health conditions, and or flu related death. *Bringing the voices of Canadian seniors together in the fight against influenza* is a unique initiative to further our understanding of specific barriers they are facing to then bring real life experiences to the public areas to inform and advocate for policy change.

The Problem

Although vaccination is one of the most effective public health interventions of modern times against infectious diseases, influenza immunization rates among Canadian seniors are consistently below the National Advisory Committee Immunization target of 80%ⁱⁱⁱ.

The goal of the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) is to improve the uptake rates of adult vaccination. The study entitled *Bringing the Voices of Canadian Seniors Together in the Fight Against Influenza*, contributes to this goal, and collected real world evidence of barriers to influenza vaccination faced by seniors across Canada. The project aims to help build the capacity of patient and senior's organizations to improve influenza vaccination coverage.

The study explores the perspectives of Canadian seniors on influenza and influenza vaccination through a systematic literature review and survey to identify the barriers to vaccination including misconceptions about the perceived risk and severity of influenza, vaccination gateways and health professional influences.

Key Findings

The views of Canadian seniors are aligned and reflect the substantive literature review concerning barriers and perceptions regarding influenza vaccination. The main barriers identified through both the literature review and survey included misconceptions about influenza vaccination and the significance of immunisation on health, the fear of pain or adverse reactions for the vaccine, and clear message confusion by respondents about whether or not COVID-19 vaccines protected them against influenza.

Recommendations

In Canada a collaborative sustained and targeted approach with clear and measurable actions is urgently required to improve older adult influenza vaccination rates and therein reduce the burden on the health and social care systems. The study findings reinforced the national and international literature giving confidence to the following recommendations:

1. Prioritization and implementation of a life-course approach to immunization as a key pillar of expanded prevention strategies will save lives of all Canadians, especially those 'at-risk'.
2. The confluence of the aggressive coronavirus pandemic which has led to the 'lockdowns' and isolation of those most vulnerable and the influenza season has created a dangerous cocktail for the development of accurate, timely and targeted public health messages.

There is evidence "message confusion" which must be addressed by all levels of government in a way that reaches the most at-risk populations.

3. Influenza immunization campaigns (message content, format, and distribution channels) must consider the varying social determinants of the at-risk populations in their development, monitoring and evaluation.
4. Reliable up-to-date evidence-based information on influenza and influenza vaccination must be consistent and accessible through various professional groups and channels including specialists.
5. Existing and innovative new infrastructure for immunization must go beyond the traditional pathways to facilitate and increase access to influenza vaccination services, including but not limited to pharmacies and other appropriate facilities including primary healthcare.
6. Health promotion and prevention requires collective efforts across sectors and disciplines. Given the overarching goal of patient and seniors organization a platform of knowledge sharing, and exchange should be established to routinely discuss strategies to actively work against the spread of misinformation.

Conclusion

The *Bringing the Voices of Canadian Seniors Together in the Fight Against Influenza* project for the first-time collected the important views from Canadian seniors about the barriers to influenza vaccination. The information collected provides a clear roadmap of changes that need to be undertaken to improve adult influenza vaccination uptake rates across Canada.

ⁱ Statistics Canada. (2021). Leading Cause of death, total population, by age group. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310039401>.

ⁱⁱ HealthLinkBC. (2020). Influenza (Flu) Immunization: Myths and Facts. Retrieved from: <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/flu-vaccine-myth-facts>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gionet, L. (2015, October 27). Flu Vaccination Rates in Canada. *Statistics Canada*, 82(624), 5. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-624-x/2015001/article/14218-eng.htm>.