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NEWS RELEASE

With a ‘triple-demic’ upon us, Canada must do more to raise its flu vaccination rates

*Survey by NIA shows Canadians are generally open to seasonal flu shots
but inconvenience and complacency stand in their way*

TORONTO, Nov. 29, 2022 — Canada has already entered what could be one of its worst flu seasons in recent years. Since 2020, public health measures designed to stop the spread of COVID-19 — such as masking requirements and restrictions on indoor gatherings — have also helped limit influenza infections, but most of those measures are no longer in place. At the same time, COVID-19 is still infecting thousands of Canadians every week, and the country is in the middle of a devastating surge in respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) infections. All of this is converging to put the country at risk of a “triple-demic” that could be especially dangerous to older adults.

One of the best defences against serious illness this fall and winter is getting vaccinated against seasonal influenza, but uptake remains frustratingly low. In contrast, Canada’s experience with COVID-19 shows that it is possible to quickly mobilize most of the population to get vaccinated. So, what’s stopping Canadians from getting their flu shots?

To answer that question, the **National Institute on Ageing** (NIA) conducted a national survey this summer in partnership with **Seqirus** and **Leger** that investigated Canadians’ attitudes and habits around vaccination. The survey findings and recommendations are shared in the NIA’s newest report: [*A Goal Within Our Reach: What the COVID-19 Pandemic has Taught Us about Improving the Uptake of Influenza Vaccinations in Canada.*](#)

Flu season typically runs from November to April. While most cases of influenza are mild, they can become much more serious. During a typical flu season in Canada, influenza causes about 175,000 emergency department visits, 12,200 hospitalizations and 3,500 deaths. Adults aged 65 years and older are at much higher risk: they make up a fifth of Canada’s population, but represent more than half of the hospitalizations and 70 per cent of the deaths related to influenza in Canada each year.

Flu shots can reduce your chances of getting or spreading influenza, and protect you from its worst effects if you do get infected. Canada’s goal is to vaccinate 80 per cent of older adults against the flu

each year, but uptake has been stuck around 70 per cent for the past three years. This is in contrast to COVID-19 vaccination rates of around 90 per cent.

The NIA's survey found that the COVID-19 pandemic has, if anything, made Canadians more open to vaccination. More than half of Canadians said their views of vaccines had not changed since the pandemic, while 28 per cent said they saw vaccines in a more positive light. About 24 per cent said COVID-19 had made them more likely to get a flu shot this year.

But positive attitudes toward vaccination do not always translate into shots in arms, with only 48 per cent of Canadians, and 70 per cent of older Canadians, getting the flu shot last year, according to the NIA's survey. The top reasons respondents gave for not getting the flu shot revolved around general indifference and the perception that the vaccine was unnecessary. This suggests a need for better public health messaging about the risks of influenza and the importance of vaccines, as well as measures to make vaccination more convenient.

Access and availability are particularly important for older Canadians, who are more likely to face transportation and mobility challenges. But successful COVID-19 vaccination campaigns gave rise to new ways to reach older adults that can be applied to flu shots.

“For example, many local health units created in-home vaccination programs for COVID-19, which means they now have more detailed data on homebound older adults,” said Dr. Samir Sinha, the NIA's Director of Health Policy Research. “There is a huge opportunity to leverage this information to deliver more influenza vaccines to protect this vulnerable population.”

Based on its survey findings, the NIA offers five recommendations to improve influenza vaccine uptake in Canada:

1. Improve messaging about the importance of flu vaccines, especially among older Canadians
2. Improve access to vaccine co-administration (i.e. delivering flu shots at the same time as vaccines for other ailments such as COVID-19, shingles or pneumonia, as approved by Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization)
3. Provide enhanced influenza vaccines free of charge to all older Canadians
4. Make vaccinations more widely available through pharmacies, primary health care providers, community clinics and targeted homebound vaccination programs
5. Create more multilingual and culturally inclusive resources that speak to individuals from diverse backgrounds

The NIA's national survey was conducted online with 1,503 Canadians aged 18 years and older using the Leger LEO Panel between Aug. 2-12, 2022. The findings have a margin of error of +/- 2.53 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

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About The National Institute on Ageing

The [National Institute on Ageing](#) is a think tank at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) focused on the realities of Canada's ageing population. Follow us on Twitter [@NIAgeing](#) and support our call for a National Seniors Strategy [@NSS_Now](#).

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