

# Get vaccinated, seniors urged

By [MARTIN CARVALHO](#)

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**PETALING JAYA:** Elderly Malaysians should not miss the opportunity to get vaccinated free against influenza starting tomorrow, say health experts.

Malaysian Medical Association president Datuk Dr Kalwinder Singh Khaira said senior citizens, who are eligible for the free vaccination, should take full advantage by registering as soon as possible for the vaccine.

“The flu vaccine is beneficial, especially for the elderly, as it is shown to be effective in protecting against complications from the flu.

“Older persons with comorbidities are at higher risk of complications, which can even lead to hospitalisation and, in some cases, death.

“Taking precautions such as getting vaccinated is strongly advised,” he said when contacted yesterday.

Dr Kalwinder, however, raised concerns over the availability of the flu vaccine at private clinics and hospitals.

“Many patients are now heeding the advice of taking precautions against the flu and asking for the vaccine.

“While we fully support the government’s free vaccination programme for high-risk seniors at government clinics, it is equally important to recognise the vital role general practitioners play in community vaccination efforts.”

He also urged the Health Ministry and vaccine suppliers to ensure adequate distribution of vaccines to private clinics and hospitals to prevent gaps in immunisation coverage.

On Feb 10, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad announced the expansion of the Influenza Immunisation Programme, which was launched in 2006, to cover not only frontline healthcare workers but also senior citizens aged 60 and above with at least one chronic illness.

The rollout of the voluntary vaccination exercise will begin on Feb 18 and is expected to benefit over 170,000 high-risk senior citizens via appointments made via the MySejahtera app.

Public health expert Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia said it is commendable that the government is expanding its immunisation programme by providing free influenza vaccinations for those above 60, particularly those with existing comorbidities.

“The risk of developing severe complications from the flu is significantly higher for elderly individuals, particularly those aged 65 and older.

“This is because they are at a much higher risk compared to younger adults due to their weakened immune system,” she said.

Although she did not provide the exact numbers, Dr Sharifa said flu-related deaths are the highest among the elderly.

“Influenza can result in a host of complications, such as pneumonia, including sepsis.

“Getting vaccinated offers protection to the elderly against developing such complications, which could prove fatal,” she added. She advised senior folk who are eligible to make the effort to get vaccinated.

“Those operating homes or centres for the care of the elderly must make it a priority for seniors under their care to be vaccinated under the programme.”

In 2023, pneumonia surpassed heart-related disease as the leading cause of death in the country, which accounted for 8,181 deaths, or 15.2% of 119,952 medically certified deaths for that year.

Association of Private Hospitals Malaysia president Datuk Dr Kuljit Singh said the elderly should not take influenza lightly but seize the chance to get vaccinated for free.

“Clinically speaking, there have been cases that have gone badly for those in this group.”

He added that it becomes challenging for doctors treating elderly patients towards recovery due to complications linked to influenza.