

Flu Shot Fails to Stem Pneumonia in Older Patients, Study Says

By Kevin Crowley

Aug. 1 (Bloomberg) -- A flu shot may be less effective at preventing pneumonia in elderly people than doctors expect, according to a study published in the [Lancet](#) medical journal.

The research compared 1,173 pneumonia patients between the ages of 65 and 94 who had been vaccinated with 2,346 people who hadn't and found the risk of the lung disease wasn't reduced by the shot, according to researchers led by Dr. Michael Jackson of the Seattle-based [Group Health Center for Health Studies](#).

The U.S. recommends that everyone over 50 years old get a flu shot to help prevent deaths and a potential pandemic. Sanofi- Aventis SA, the world's largest maker of influenza shots, is creating a 100-million-euro (\$156 million) plant in France because the Paris-based drugmaker expects demand for immunizations to double to 22 billion euros by 2016. The results undermine earlier studies that found vaccinated patients are up to 30 percent less likely to need hospital treatment for pneumonia.

"It's one more piece of evidence that the vaccination may be not as useful as we thought," Jackson said in a telephone interview. "We don't know how well it works in older seniors who may have chronic heart and lung diseases. We don't know how much of pneumonia is caused by the flu."

Jackson said more research is needed, as the older findings may have been biased by health differences in the groups studied and not have included patients who were discharged from hospital in under 24 hours.

Pneumonia is a potentially fatal infection that inflames the lungs, filling them with fluid that causes breathing difficulties and chest pain. People suffering from flu are more likely to contract the disease because their immune system is weaker and the virus can spread to the lungs.

58,000 Deaths

More than 200,000 [Americans](#) are hospitalized from flu complications each year, according to the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control. In 2004, 58,564 people died from pneumonia in the U.S. About 90 percent of deaths and half of hospitalizations are among the aged, the CDC says.

The study may mean a reduction of flu risk has no effect on the chances of contracting pneumonia, or it could indicate that the flu vaccine is ineffective in elderly people who are most at risk of the illness, the researchers said.

`` These two possibilities have quite different implications for vaccine development and vaccination recommendations," the authors concluded.

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