

Policy brief on 'Enhancing influenza protection for Vietnam's older adult population'

Summary

This policy brief is based on a roundtable discussion on enhancing influenza vaccine coverage among older adults in Vietnam held on Tuesday, 25 June 2024, co-organised by Asia Pacific Alliance for the Control of Influenza (APACI) and Ageing Asia, supported by Sanofi. Esteemed experts in the field (see Appendix 1 for expert panel members) convened to address the urgent need for improved influenza prevention strategies as Vietnam's population ages. Guided by the objectives of identifying barriers to vaccine uptake, sharing global best practices, and formulating actionable solutions, experts discussed challenges and opportunities for increasing influenza vaccine coverage among the older adult population in Vietnam.

The policy recommendations provided in this brief are derived from the key insights from the roundtable, centred around four core pillars:

Promote widespread vaccine knowledge and awareness through targeted public health messaging	Improve vaccine access and affordability by implementing subsidies and incentives to reduce financial barriers
Empower healthcare professionals with educational resources to promote vaccination among patients	Establish clear guidelines and robust surveillance systems to inform vaccination best practices

By prioritising these evidence-informed policy actions, Vietnam can effectively enhance influenza vaccine coverage among older adults, reduce health disparities among vulnerable populations, and promote healthy ageing for all.

Existing challenge:

Increased disease burden in Vietnam's rapidly ageing population

Vietnam faces a critical challenge in safeguarding its rapidly ageing population from the significant burden of influenza. While the nation has made strides in healthcare, including a recent shift in focus to improving preventive health services,^{1,2} the effectiveness of current influenza prevention strategies could be enhanced. Effective influenza prevention strategies need to be in place given Vietnam's demographic trajectory: the country is home to one of the fastest ageing populations globally, with projections indicating that 20% of the total population will be aged 60 and above by 2038, transitioning from an ageing society to an aged society.³ This demographic shift is accompanied by a high prevalence of chronic diseases among older adults such as stroke, hypertension and diabetes, making them particularly vulnerable to severe influenza complications.^{4,5}

Simultaneously, the proportion of Vietnam's total health expenditure spent on out-of-pocket expenses (~39.6%) is more than double the global average (16.32%).⁶ The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that out-of-pocket spending in the Asia Pacific region should

not exceed 30-40% of total health expenditure, indicating a significant financial burden on patients.⁷

Strengthening primary healthcare and focusing on a preventative model that includes vaccination against common diseases, including influenza, could reduce out-of-pocket expenditure for the general population.

Recognising these challenges, Vietnam has begun a crucial shift from curative care towards one that prioritises primary healthcare, disease prevention, and health promotion. This shift is evident in governmental initiatives to improve grassroots health services aimed at improving preventive medicines and early disease screening at the commune level.⁸ Recent policy reforms further underscore this commitment to strengthening preventive health services.⁹ However, despite these advancements, influenza prevention efforts in Vietnam require further attention.

Influenza poses a disproportionate threat to Vietnam's older adult population

Data indicates that Vietnamese older adults are significantly more likely to experience severe disease, hospitalisation, and mortality from influenza compared to other age groups (**Figure 1**).¹⁰

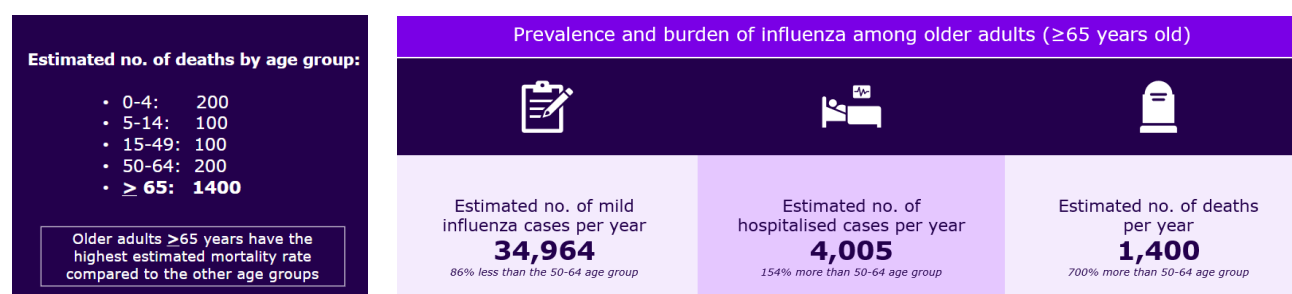


Figure 1. Estimated influenza-associated morbidity and mortality among Vietnamese older adults¹⁰

Despite this heightened risk and the Vietnam Ministry of Health's current recommendations for the influenza vaccine to high-risk groups including those over 65 years old, the estimated influenza vaccination rate among older adults falls short of optimal levels at 5.55% (**Figure 2**).¹¹ This low uptake can be attributed to several factors:

- Misconceptions of influenza as a mild illness
- Lack of awareness about its severe impact on older adults
- Greater emphasis placed on other vaccination programmes compared to influenza
- Out-of-pocket cost barrier of flu vaccines

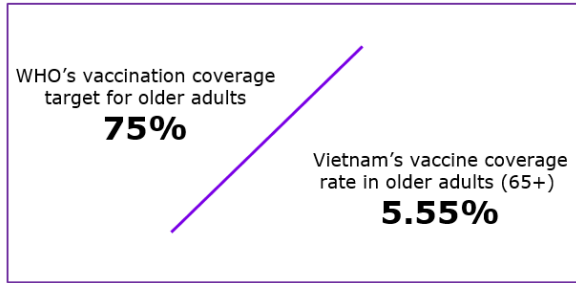


Figure 2. Target influenza vaccine coverage rate recommended by WHO and current influenza vaccination rate among older adults in Vietnam aged ≥ 65 years old*

*Estimates from local market research

Notably, influenza vaccinations in Vietnam are primarily accessed through private out-of-pocket settings, meaning older adults must bear the cost themselves. Although influenza vaccines are available at both private and public/state-owned vaccination centres, the cost barrier may deter many older adults from getting vaccinated.

Scientific evidence underscores the effectiveness of vaccination in reducing the risk of severe influenza complications and potentially lowering the risk of cardiovascular events.¹² Moreover, evidence from real-world studies and clinical trials show that the use of differentiated vaccine options such as high-dose vaccines offers four times the antigen (substances that trigger the body's immune response) compared to standard-dose vaccines, leading to significant reductions in influenza cases and hospitalisations, as well as an improved immune response in seniors (**Figure 3**).^{13,14}

High-dose influenza vaccines demonstrated greater effectiveness in adults ≥ 65 years compared to standard-dose vaccines

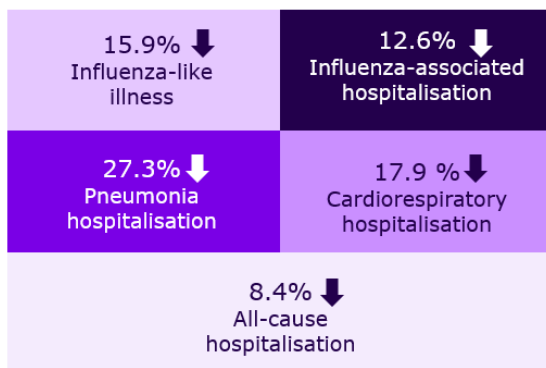


Figure 3. Comparison between effectiveness of high-dose influenza vaccine and standard-dose influenza vaccine.¹²

To effectively protect Vietnam's ageing population from influenza, urgent action is needed to address vaccination barriers, increase awareness, and strengthen preventive health strategies. This requires a comprehensive approach that combines impactful messaging, strategic partnerships, and targeted outreach activities that resonate with older adults.

Policy and Implementation Recommendations

To increase influenza vaccine coverage rates among Vietnam's older adult population and address the challenges identified; the following strategies have been proposed by the Expert Panel:

1. Boost public awareness and education

- **Launch targeted educational campaigns** via multiple channels such as mass media, social media, and community events. Influenza risks, vaccination benefits, and the availability of differentiated vaccine options such as high-dose influenza vaccines for older adults and caregivers, can be the central themes of these educational campaigns.
- **Engage community collaborators** such as village leaders, local health workers, and community leaders to deliver influenza-related influenza prevention messages, including the importance of differentiated vaccine strategies (e.g. high-dose vaccines) in a way that resonates with the elderly.
- **Leverage elderly clubs or senior care centres** as platforms to share case studies of how differentiated vaccine strategies including high-dose influenza vaccines can protect older adults from severe influenza complications.

"The views of older people vary, so their communication methods need to be tailored accordingly. Word of mouth is particularly effective in this demographic. Successful communication with one individual (through their doctors) can influence their peer group, acting as a small group influencer."

MD Pham Quang Thai

2. Improve vaccine access and affordability

- **Advocate for increased government funding** for influenza vaccines including different vaccine options (e.g. high-dose vaccines), through subsidies or lower insurance premiums for those taking preventive measures.
- **Partner with vaccine providers and suppliers** to introduce targeted financial incentives like subsidies or vouchers, that encourage at-risk patients including older adults to get vaccinated against influenza.
- **Explore partnerships with private sector companies** that could set up on-site vaccination clinics to provide influenza vaccines, including differentiated vaccine options, to both employees and their senior family members.

"When I serve as a family doctor, I've observed that if there are subsidies available, it provides an incentive for patients to get the vaccination."

- MD Lam Minh Yen

3. Empower healthcare professionals to address vaccine hesitancy and promote vaccine uptake

- **Develop education programmes and training for healthcare professionals** across all levels of care to reinforce the importance of routine influenza vaccination for older adults and equip them with up-to-date resources (including the availability of differentiated vaccine options) and effective patient communication strategies.
- **Craft a unified flu prevention messaging for patient communication** through a multi-disciplinary collaboration with geriatricians, primary care physicians, and

infectious disease specialists. This will help encourage the discussion of flu prevention during doctor's visits or specialist consultations to ensure older adults are aware of the importance of flu prevention. The messaging can also be leveraged for wider community education through community centres, clinics, or various media channels.

- **Leverage the trusted role of healthcare professionals**, such as family doctors and other providers regularly interacting with older adults, to actively promote influenza vaccines including the availability of differentiated vaccine options (e.g. high dose vaccines) during routine check-ups and hospital discharge.
- **Educate healthcare professionals about the role and benefits of differentiated vaccines**, such as high-dose vaccines, in enhancing protection against influenza complications for older adults.

4. Strengthen medical guidelines, data collection, and surveillance

- **Collaborate with relevant government ministries, public health agencies, medical associations, and healthcare professionals** to establish clear medical guidelines for influenza prevention among older adults (including differentiated vaccine strategies) to enhance vaccination communication and uptake of influenza vaccines.
- **Improve influenza monitoring and surveillance** to provide insights on vaccination efficacy and circulating variants to inform healthcare professionals, purchasers, and policymakers to inform targeted interventions and policy decisions.
- **Prioritise research initiatives** focused on influenza disease burden and cost-effectiveness analyses to identify best practices for increasing flu vaccination rates among older adults and ensuring access to differentiated vaccine options including high-dose vaccines.

"The unique complexities associated with older adult care makes the work of clinicians more challenging, especially when we have limited information on influenza disease burden to highlight the urgent need for vaccination strategies.

Thus, a more customised approach to addressing the specific needs of older adults in policy discussions is warranted. "

- Dr Bach Thi Chinh

Conclusion

Addressing the low influenza vaccination rates among Vietnam's older adult population necessitates an urgent and comprehensive strategy. This multifaceted approach includes:

- Raising public awareness of influenza risk and the availability of differentiated vaccine options
- Equipping healthcare professionals with up-to-date vaccination resources to support patient conversations
- Incentivising vaccination to enhance vaccine uptake in Vietnam
- Implementing evidence-based policies to ensure at-risk populations (e.g. older adults) are protected from severe influenza-related illness

Insights from the roundtable discussion emphasise the significance of tailored communication, lifelong vaccination education, and collaboration across sectors. A proactive and collaborative effort among policymakers, government officials, and healthcare providers is crucial in driving influenza vaccine uptake in Vietnam. Supporting healthy ageing through effective influenza prevention strategies improves the quality of life for older adults while translating into significant healthcare cost savings. This ultimately will contribute to healthier communities and a more robust healthcare system in Vietnam.

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Appendix 1: Expert panel

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