

October 2002

Patient Powerline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

RE: Flu Season is Just Around the Corner

Dear Friend,

Welcome to the Fall Season – which reminds me, don't forget to schedule your flu shot. Do you realize that of all folks eligible for the flu shot less than 60% get it? Yet getting the flu shot or not could mean a matter of life or death for seniors, people with chronic respiratory, heart or kidney disease and almost anyone with a chronic serious illness. The flu really is one of the most preventable diseases – if we get the shot! The best time to get the shot is in late October, about a month before the flu season begins. It only takes two weeks after the shot to develop immunity so it is almost never too late if you forget in October. Although almost anyone can benefit from the flu shot, seniors and people with any chronic medical condition should be first in line. This year people over the age of 50 and infants are advised to get the flu shot as well.

**\*\*WARNING:** Remember, if you are allergic to eggs you can't get the flu shot. The virus in the flu vaccine was developed in egg products.

And while you are in the office getting your flu shot, ask your doctor if you need the Pneumonia shot as well. All people over the age of 65 should get the pneumonia shot at least once and anyone who does not have a spleen (you can't fight the pneumonia bacteria as well) or who has a chronic serious condition. The good news is that it can last for 5 to 10 years or maybe even longer. Believe it or not, less than 40% of eligible patients get the pneumonia shot – which is unfortunate in my opinion. The most common excuse is that their doctor's didn't remind them. Doctors simply don't have time to remember everything about you on each doctor visit. You really need to help your doctor do her job.

I am often asked what happens if you forgot that you already received the pneumonia shot and get another one a few years later? The truth is this – nothing serious will happen BUT you will get a sore arm. All the more reason you keep track of your own immunizations. Let me show you how...

If you have been using my system and already carry a wallet card with your emergency health information, check the part that mentions pneumonia and flu shots. Did you fill in a date of your last shots? If not, talk to your doctor during your next visit. If you don't have an emergency health information card, write to me at <http://www.dr.savard.com>. You can download free from my website a health-at-a-glance form, [http://www.dr.savard.com/docs/health\\_at\\_a\\_glance.pdf](http://www.dr.savard.com/docs/health_at_a_glance.pdf), form that has the very same information as the wallet-sized card. Fill one out for your spouse or a friend as well.

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I was recently asked to write an article for a magazine that is distributed to thousands of patients who are coping with cancer. I thought I would share this article with you.

## Taking Charge of Your Health Care: Insider's secrets that could save your life

Five years ago my closest friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. Familiar with routine childbirth and GYN exams, she was suddenly thrown into the maze we call the health care system.

First her oncologist requested copies of *all* her previous medical records before she could even get an appointment (no small feat for someone who moved frequently with lots of previous doctors). Next, she was given a dizzying amount of complicated information and treatment choices to consider. She then began a series of doctor visits and hospital stays where she quickly learned how confusing and complicated our healthcare system really is. Her story reminds me that if anyone is to be in charge and keep track of your health information, it has to be you!

During my 30 years of caring for patients, first as a nurse and now as a doctor, I developed a system to help people do just that – take charge of their health. I wrote about this in my books, *How To Save Your Own Life* and *The Savard Health Record*. Let me share with you some life-saving steps:

- 1) Trust your own health radar – you are the best expert on you. My friend believed that something was wrong with her breast, but was reassured by her doctor's exam and didn't speak up. Many of my patients are afraid to have faith in their own instincts. If that includes you, you're actually making your doctor's job harder. You're doctor may have years of special training but still, there is no substitute for what *you* know about how *you* feel – and how it is different from the way you usually feel. Speak up.
- 2) Collect and maintain copies of your medical records and make them available to everyone involved in your care. 80% of the information a doctor relies on to make an accurate diagnosis comes from your medical history, but rarely does your doctor have all your information in one place. My friend would often arrive for her visit only to find the doctor didn't have her medical history in hand. Train yourself to ask for a copy of test results and pathology reports, hospital discharge summaries and consultation reports. You are entitled to copies of this information. Make a personal health information list to carry with you at all times. Tuck it in your wallet along with your insurance card. Include a list of

your medical conditions, allergies and all medications including dose and directions.

- 3) Form a partnership with your health care team. Don't go it alone, take a "health buddy" – someone who can help you with questions and the information the doctor reports. Even the most assertive person can be afraid and forget what they hear when they get behind the closed door of the doctor's office. Keep a health journal to record all that is happening to you. Prepare for every doctor visit by filling out an agenda listing your questions and concerns. Your "health buddy" can fill out the doctor's conclusion and advice. Share in important decisions by doing your homework and then asking tough questions. See that you get the preventive tests you need. The flu and pneumonia vaccine, as well as screening for other cancers and heart disease, are important too. If you need to be hospitalized, find a team of "health buddies" who can stay with you at all times.

The good news is that we do have the best health care system in the world that will work for us if we do our part. I am happy to say that my friend is doing well. She not only has a complete set of medical records, she now has trained a team of "health buddies" who are helping others just as they once helped her.

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To learn more about The Savard System, download free forms to record personal health information and prepare for doctor visits, or buy the books, please visit me at [www.drsavard.com](http://www.drsavard.com).

Don't forget to write me with your questions, <http://www.drsavard.com/askdrsavard.htm>. I promise to answer as many of them personally as I can. My track record so far is almost 100%. See you in a month or so!

Warm regards,

Marie Savard, MD

**Marie Savard, MD** is an internationally known internist, women's health expert and champion of patient empowerment. She is the founder of The Savard System, dedicated to teaching patients how to manage their own healthcare. She is the author of two highly acclaimed books, *How to Save Your Life: The Savard System for Managing-and Controlling-Your Health Care* (Warner Books, Inc. 2000) and *The Savard Health Record: a Six-Step System for Managing Your Health Care* (Time-Life, Inc. 2000).

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