

CARERS AND FLU VACCINATIONS

- Carers are one of the groups of people eligible for a free NHS flu vaccination if they look after an older or disabled person whose welfare would be at risk if the carer caught the flu. This includes carers who receive Carer's Allowance.
- Flu vaccinations are available from the carer's GP practice or from most community pharmacies (visit <http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Pharmacy/LocationSearch/10>)
- In London, community pharmacies have also been commissioned to provide free NHS flu vaccinations to people who help to care for someone, as well as main carers of people who couldn't get by without their support due to old age, disability, mental or physical ill health or an addiction.
- Due to their age, health condition or disability, people who are supported by a carer may already be at increased risk of catching the flu and developing serious complications, which can sometimes be fatal.
- Not only can a flu jab reduce the chances of a carer catching the flu, it can also reduce the risk of the carer passing the virus on to the person they care for.
- Evidence suggests that just over 12% of carers under the age of 65 and not in an 'at-risk' groups received an NHS flu jab last year.

FACTS ABOUT THE FLU

What is flu?

Flu is a highly infectious disease with symptoms that include extreme tiredness, fever, chills, headaches and aches and pains in the joints and muscles. A carer with the flu would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to look after someone. They may also be worried about passing on the flu to the person they care for and want to avoid being in contact with them.

What causes flu?

Flu is caused by viruses that are spread from person to person which infect the respiratory system and can lead to pneumonia and other complications. The viruses are constantly changing, which is one of the reasons why people should have a flu jab every year.

How is flu spread?

Flu is spread by coughs and sneezes that send infected droplets into the air which are then breathed in by other people. It's also spread by people touching surfaces that the droplets have landed on and then touching their mouth, nose or eyes. For this reason, people are advised to wash their hands frequently or use an antiseptic hand rub during the winter flu season.

How can carers avoid catching the flu?

It can be quite difficult. People can be infectious several days before the symptoms kick in or can carry the virus with few or no symptoms, so it's not as simple as 'avoiding' people who are unwell. Other members of the household can bring the virus into the home as well. Even regular hand washing can't prevent people from breathing in infected droplets in the air.

What difference can a flu jab make?

A flu jab can significantly reduce a carer's risk of getting flu or passing it on to the person they look after. People who are supported by a carer are often more vulnerable to catching the virus and developing serious infections. In some cases, this can result in hospitalisation, permanent disability and even death. The same applies to other members of the household.

What impact can flu have on someone's ability to provide care?

Unlike a cold, flu can come on very suddenly. A carer can go to bed one night feeling fine and wake up the next day with a raging fever and barely enough energy to sip a glass of water. So they may have little or no time to find someone to take over their caring responsibilities. As a result, the person who needs their support could be left in a distressing or even dangerous situation.

What about carers who are already in an at-risk group?

Around 18% of carers are older people and are eligible for an NHS flu vaccination due to their age. Carers who have a long-term condition are also eligible. Some carers, however, may be so busy that they forget about their own health needs or struggle to attend the flu clinics provided by their GP. Offering carers a flu jab opportunistically – for example, at a pharmacy while they're waiting to collect a prescription – is an alternative approach that could help reach many more carers in future.

Could a flu jab cause side effects that would make a carer too ill to look after someone?

There are some fairly common but mild side effects that are unlikely to prevent the carer from caring. Some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, and their arm may feel a bit sore where they were injected. Any other reactions are very rare.

Which carers are eligible for a free NHS flu jab?

- **In England**, they're free to people who receive Carer's Allowance and/or who are the main carer of an older or disabled person whose welfare would be at risk if the person who cares for them falls ill.
- **In London**, they're also available to people who help to care as well as the main carers of people who couldn't get by without their support due to old age, disability, mental or physical ill health or an addiction.

NB. in both of the above cases, people sharing a household and in close contact with someone who has a compromised immune system are also eligible.

How do carers arrange to have a flu jab?

If a carer hasn't already been invited to have a flu vaccination, they should contact their GP or pharmacy and explain that they look after someone whose welfare would be at risk if they were ill and, as their unpaid carer, they would like to request a free NHS flu vaccination.

For more information visit NHS Choices at: www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/pages/flu-influenza-vaccine.aspx



Produced by juliaellis@reachingcarers.org 2016.