

The flu vaccination

Winter 2014/15

Who should have it and why

Includes information for children
and pregnant women



This leaflet explains how you can protect yourself and your children against flu this coming winter, and why it's very important that people who are at increased risk from flu have their free flu vaccination every year.



What is flu? Isn't it just a heavy cold?

How will I know I've got it?

Flu occurs every year, usually in the winter, which is why it's sometimes called seasonal flu. It's a highly infectious disease with symptoms that come on very quickly. Colds are much less serious and usually start gradually with a stuffy or runny nose and a sore throat. A bad bout of flu can be much worse than a heavy cold.

The most common symptoms of flu are fever, chills, headache, aches and pains in the joints and muscles, and extreme tiredness. In most cases, the symptoms are quite mild, but in others, they can be very serious.

Healthy individuals usually recover within two to seven days, but for some the disease can lead to hospitalisation, permanent disability or even death.

What causes flu?

Flu is caused by influenza viruses that infect the windpipe and lungs. And because it's caused by viruses and not bacteria, antibiotics won't treat it.

How do you catch flu? Can I avoid it?

When an infected person coughs or sneezes, they spread the flu virus in tiny droplets of saliva over a wide area. These droplets can then be breathed in by other people or they can be picked up by touching surfaces where the droplets have landed. You can prevent the spread of the virus by covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, and you can wash your hands frequently or use hand gels to reduce the risk of picking up the virus.

But the best way to avoid catching and spreading flu is by having the vaccination before the flu season starts.

How do we protect against flu?

The most likely viruses that will cause flu each year are identified in advance of the flu season in the UK and vaccines are then made to match them as closely as possible.

Most flu vaccines protect against three types of flu virus, although this year two that protect against four types are also available.

What harm can flu do?

People sometimes think a bad cold is flu, but having flu can be much worse than a cold and you may need to stay in bed for a few days.

Some people are more susceptible to the effects of flu. For them, it can increase the risk of developing more serious illnesses such as bronchitis and pneumonia, or can make existing conditions worse. In the worst cases, flu can result in a stay in hospital, or even death.

Am I at increased risk from the effects of flu?

Even if you feel healthy, you should have the free flu vaccination if you are:

- pregnant

or have:

- a heart problem
- a chest complaint or breathing difficulties, including bronchitis, emphysema or severe asthma
- a kidney disease
- lowered immunity due to disease or treatment (such as steroid medication or cancer treatment)
- liver disease
- had a stroke or a transient ischaemic attack (TIA)
- diabetes

- a neurological condition, for example multiple sclerosis (MS), cerebral palsy or learning difficulties
- a problem with your spleen, for example sickle cell disease, or you have had your spleen removed.

Who should consider having a flu vaccination?

All those who have any condition listed on page 4, or who are:

- aged 65 years or over
- living in a residential or nursing home
- the main carer of an older or disabled person
- a household contact of an immunocompromised person
- a health or social care worker
- pregnant (see the next section) or
- are two, three or four years of age

should have the vaccination.

By having the vaccination, paid and unpaid carers will reduce their chances of getting flu. They can then continue to help those they look after.

If you have a two-,three or four-year-old child, you should take them for the vaccination when invited by your surgery. If you do not hear by about the middle of October, contact your surgery to make an appointment.

All children in primary school and years 7 and 8 in pilot areas around the country will also be invited to have a flu vaccination (see *What about my children?*, below).

Don't wait until there is a flu outbreak this winter: contact your GP or practice nurse now to get your free flu jab.



I had the flu vaccination last year. Do I need another one this year?

Yes; the flu vaccine for each winter provides protection against current strains of flu that may be different from last year's. For this reason we strongly recommend that even if you were vaccinated last year, you should be vaccinated again this year. It may also boost the effects of last year's vaccination.

The flu vaccination for pregnant women

I am pregnant. Do I need a flu vaccination this year?

Yes. All pregnant women should have the flu vaccine to protect themselves and their babies. The flu vaccine can be given safely at any stage of pregnancy, from conception onwards.

Pregnant women benefit from the flu vaccine because it will:

- reduce their risk of serious complications such as pneumonia, particularly in the later stages of pregnancy
- reduce the risk of miscarriage or having a baby born too soon or with a low birth weight
- help protect their baby who will continue to have some immunity to flu during the first few months of its life
- reduce the chance of the mother passing infection to her new baby.

I am pregnant and I think I may have flu. What should I do?

You should talk to your doctor urgently, because if you do have flu, there is a prescribed medicine that might help (or reduce the risk of complications), but it needs to be taken very soon after the symptoms appear.

Talk to your GP or midwife if you are unsure about the vaccination.



I think I've already had flu, do I need a vaccination?

Yes; as you won't know which flu virus has caused your flu, you should still have the vaccination to protect you against the other flu viruses as soon as the illness has gone.

What about my children? Do they need the vaccination?

If you have a child over six months of age who has one of the conditions listed on page 4, they should have a flu vaccination. All these children are more likely to become more ill if they catch flu, and it could make their existing condition worse. Talk to your GP or practice nurse about your child having the flu vaccination before the flu season starts.

The flu vaccine does not work well in babies under six months so it is not recommended. This is why it is so important that pregnant women have the vaccination – they will pass on some immunity to their baby that will protect them during the early months of their life.

This year, as last, some children are also being offered the flu vaccination. This is to protect them against the disease and help reduce its spread to other children, including their older brothers or sisters, and, of course, their parents and grandparents. This will avoid the need to take time off work because of flu or to look after your children with flu.

The children being offered the vaccine this year, are:

- all two-, three- and four-year-olds,
- primary school children in pilot areas around the country, and
- children in school years 7 and 8 in pilot areas around the country.



The pre-school children will have the vaccination in your GP's surgery. Specially trained healthcare teams will organise vaccination sessions. For most children the vaccine will be given as a spray in each nostril. This is a very quick, effective and painless procedure.

Children aged six months up to two years with any of the conditions listed on p.4 will get the inactivated flu vaccine by injection. Children aged two years or over to under 18 years with any of the conditions on p.4 will get the nasal flu vaccine unless they can't have it for medical reasons, in which case they too will get the inactivated flu vaccine by injection. Your surgery will contact you to make an appointment for your child to be vaccinated. If you do not hear by about the middle of October, contact your surgery to make an appointment.

For more information on this part of the programme see the leaflet Protecting your child against flu at www.gov.uk/government/collections/annual-flu-programme and click on 'Childhood flu immunisation programme from September 2014 to 2015: information for parents and schools' in the list of documents, and the website www.nhs.uk/child-flu

Can the flu vaccine be given to my child at the same time as other vaccines?

Yes. The flu vaccine can be given at the same time as all routine childhood vaccines. The vaccination can go ahead if your child has a minor illness such as a cold but may be delayed if your child has an illness that causes a fever.

Not all flu vaccines are suitable for children. Please make sure that you discuss this with your GP beforehand.

Is there anyone who shouldn't have the vaccination?

Almost everybody can have the vaccine, but you should not be vaccinated if you have had a serious allergy to the vaccine, or any of its ingredients, in the past.



If you are allergic to hen's eggs or have a condition that weakens your immune system, you may not be able to have certain types of flu vaccine – check with your GP.

If you have a fever, the vaccination may be delayed until you are better.

What about my children?

Children should not have the nasal vaccine if they:

- are currently wheezy or have been wheezy in the past week (vaccination should be delayed until at least seven days after the wheezing has stopped)
- are severely asthmatic, i.e. being treated with oral steroids or high dose inhaled steroids
- are allergic to eggs or any part of the vaccine* or
- have a condition that severely weakens their immune system.

Also, children who have been vaccinated should avoid close contact with people with very severely weakened immune systems for around two weeks following vaccination because there's an extremely remote chance that the vaccine virus may be passed to them.

* See the website at xpil.medicines.org.uk and enter 'Fluenz or Fluenz tetra' in the search box for a list of the ingredients of Fluenz vaccine'

I believe the nasal vaccine contains products derived from pigs (porcine gelatine), which means my child can't have it because of our beliefs.

The nasal vaccine contains a highly processed form of gelatine (derived from pigs), which is used in a range of many essential medicines. The nasal vaccine provides the best protection against flu, particularly in young children.

This nasal vaccine not only protects your child against disease but, if enough children are vaccinated, the disease won't spread from one person to another, and so their friends and family are also protected.

Some faith groups accept the use of porcine gelatine in medical products – the decision is, of course, up to you. For further information about porcine gelatine and the nasal flu vaccine, see www.gov.uk/government/news/vaccines-and-gelatine-phe-response

Can't my child have the injected vaccine that doesn't contain gelatine?

By having the nasal vaccine, your child reduces the risk to, for example, a baby brother or sister who is too young to be vaccinated, as well as other family members (for example, grandparents) who may be more vulnerable to the complications of flu. The injected vaccine is not thought to reduce spread so effectively and so is not being offered to healthy children as part of this programme. However, if your child is at high risk from flu due to one or more medical conditions or treatments and can't have the nasal flu vaccine, they should have the flu vaccine by injection.

Why is a flu vaccination my best protection against flu?

You can do things like washing your hands and using disposable tissues for coughs and sneezes, but the vaccination will help your body to fight flu viruses. Your body starts making antibodies against the viruses about a week to ten days after the injection. These antibodies help to protect you against similar flu viruses that you may meet. The flu vaccine will not protect you against the common cold or other winter viruses.

Will I get any side effects?

Side effects of the nasal vaccine may commonly include a runny or blocked nose, headache, tiredness and some loss of appetite. Children having the injected vaccine may get a sore arm at the site of the injection, a temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days after the vaccination. Serious side effects with either vaccine are uncommon.

Will the flu vaccine protect me completely?

Most people who have the flu vaccination will not get flu. However, like any vaccine, it does not give complete protection. When the vaccine is well matched to the circulating virus strains, then around three-quarters of those vaccinated are likely to be protected. The rest may have some protection that could reduce the severity of their symptoms.

How long will I be protected for?

The vaccine should provide protection throughout the 2014/15 flu season.

What do I need to do now?

If you belong to one of the groups mentioned in this leaflet, it's important that you have your flu vaccination. The vaccines are normally available from the beginning of September, depending on supplies.

Speak to your GP or practice nurse, or alternatively your local pharmacist, to book a vaccination appointment and get the best possible protection.

The flu jab is free. So make an appointment with your GP surgery.

Organisations wishing to protect their employees against flu (unless they are at risk) will need to make arrangements for the vaccinations to be given through their occupational health departments. These vaccinations are not available on the NHS and will have to be paid for by the employer.

If you are a health or social care worker, find out what arrangements have been made at your workplace for providing flu vaccination.

It is best to have the flu vaccination in the autumn before any outbreaks of flu. Remember that you need it every year, so don't assume you are protected because you had one last year.

For more information about how to protect yourself and your family this winter visit www.nhs.uk/livewell/winterhealth/Pages/Winterhealthhome.aspx

Summary of those who are recommended to have the flu vaccine:

- everyone aged 65 and over
- everyone under 65 years of age who has a medical condition listed on page 4, including children and babies over six months of age
- all pregnant women, at any stage of pregnancy
- all two-, three- and four-year-old children
- all children in primary school and years 7 and 8 in pilot areas around the country
- everyone living in a residential or nursing home
- everyone who cares for an older or disabled person
- household contacts of anyone who is immunocompromised
- all frontline health and social care workers.

For advice and information about the flu vaccination, speak to your GP, practice nurse or pharmacist.



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