Public Health England

NHS

The flu vaccination

WINTER 2018/19

Who should have it and why

Includes information for children and pregnant women

STAY WELL THIS WINTER

Flu immunisation

Helping to protect everyone, every winter

This leaflet explains how you can help 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 vaccination every year.

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

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. 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. However, if there are complications from getting flu, antibiotics may be needed.

Flu vaccines help protect against the main types of flu virus circulating

How do you catch flu?

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?

Flu is unpredictable. The vaccine provides the best protection available against a virus that can cause severe illness. The most likely viruses that will cause flu are identified in advance of the flu season and vaccines are then made to match them as closely as possible.

The vaccines are given in the autumn ideally before flu starts circulating. During the last ten years the vaccine has generally been a good match for the circulating strains.

What harm can flu do?

People sometimes think a bad cold is flu, but having flu can often 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?

Flu can affect anyone but if you have a long-term health condition the effects of flu can make it worse even if the condition is well managed and you normally feel well. You should have the free flu vaccine if you are:

- pregnant

or have a long term condition such as:

- 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, eg multiple sclerosis (MS), cerebral palsy or learning disability
- a problem with your spleen, eg sickle cell disease, or you have had your spleen removed
- are seriously overweight (BMI of 40 and above)

This list of conditions isn't definitive. It's always an issue of clinical judgement. Your GP can assess you to take into account the risk of flu making any underlying illness you may have worse, as well as your risk of serious illness from flu itself.

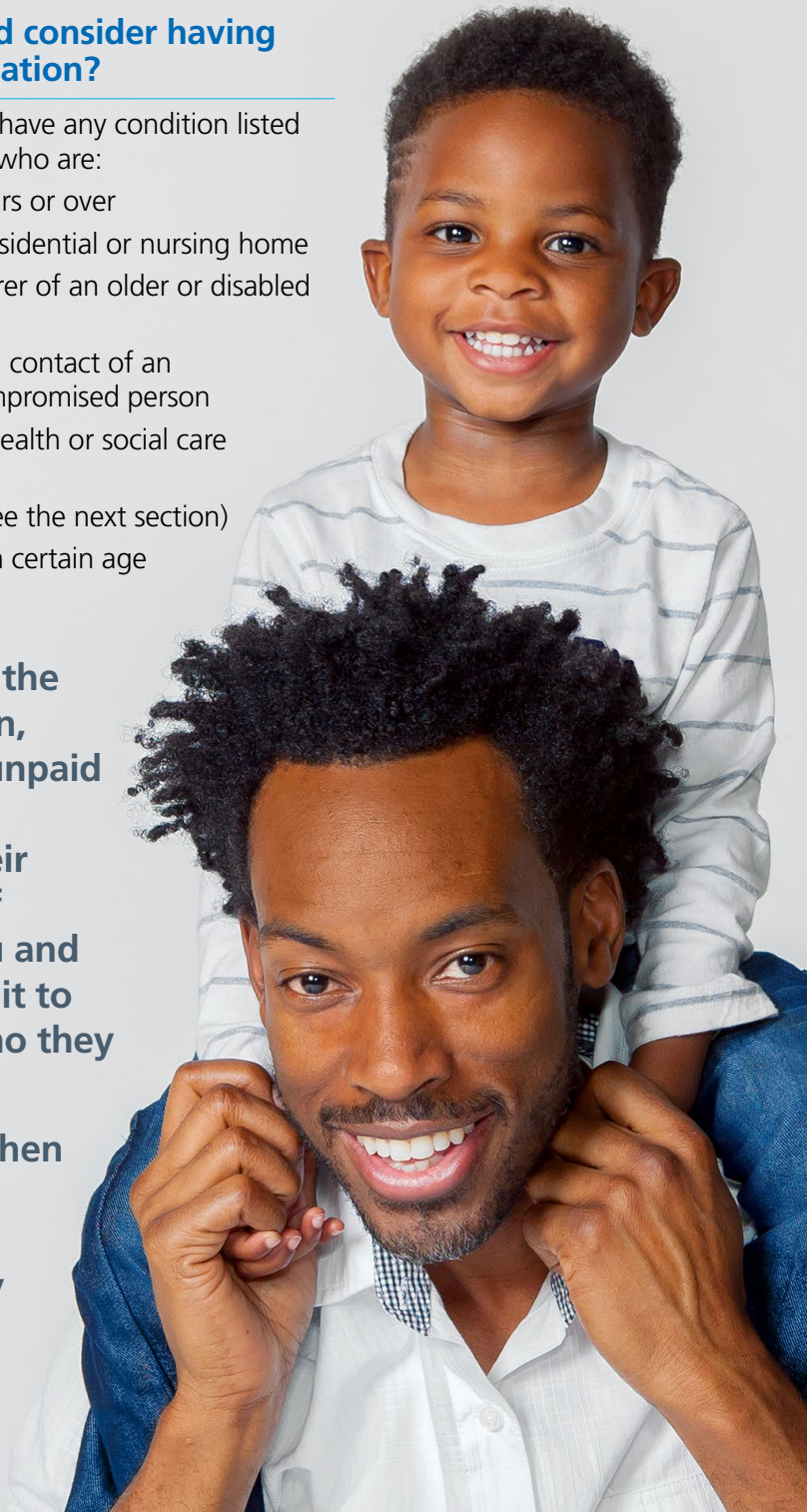
Who should consider having a flu vaccination?

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 frontline health or social care worker
- pregnant (see the next section)
- children of a certain age (see page 8)

By having the vaccination, paid and unpaid carers will reduce their chances of getting flu and spreading it to people who they care for.

They can then continue to help those they look after.



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?

If you have flu symptoms 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 as soon as possible after the symptoms appear.

You can get the free flu vaccine from your general practice (GP), or it may also be available from your pharmacist or midwife.

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

Yes; the flu vaccine for each winter helps provide protection against the strains of flu that are likely to be present and may be different from those circulating last year.

For this reason we strongly recommend that even if you were vaccinated last year, you should be vaccinated again this year. In addition, protection from the flu vaccine may only last about six months so you should have the flu vaccine each flu season.

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

Yes; other viruses can give you flu-like symptoms, or you may have had flu but because there is more than one type of flu virus you should still have the vaccine even if you think you've had flu.

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 severely ill if they catch flu, and it could make their existing condition worse. Talk to your GP about your child having the flu vaccination before the flu season starts.

The flu vaccine does not work well in babies under six months of age 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.

Some other groups of children are also being offered the flu vaccination. This is to help protect them against the disease and help reduce its spread both to other children, including their brothers or sisters, and, of course, their parents and grandparents.

This will help you to 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 and three years of age[1]
- all children in reception class and school years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5[2]

Children aged two and three years will be given the vaccination at their general practice usually by the practice nurse. Nearly all eligible children in reception year and school years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 throughout England will be offered the flu vaccine in school. For most children, the vaccine will be given as a spray in each nostril. This is a very quick and painless procedure.

For more information on children and flu vaccination see the NHS Choices information at nhs.uk/child-flu

Which type of flu vaccine should I have?

There are three types of flu vaccine:

- a live attenuated quadrivalent vaccine, given as a nasal spray. This is for children and young people aged 2 to 17 years in an eligible group
- a quadrivalent injected vaccine. This is for adults aged 18 and over but below the age of 65 who are at increased risk from flu because of a long term health condition and for children 6 months and above in an eligible group who cannot receive the live attenuated vaccine
- an adjuvanted injected vaccine. This is for people aged 65 and over

If your child is aged between 6 months and 2 years old and is in a high-risk group for flu, they will be offered an injected flu vaccine as the nasal spray is not licenced for children under the age of two.

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.

Is there anyone who shouldn't have the vaccination?

Almost everybody can have the vaccine, but you should not be vaccinated if you have ever had a serious allergy to the vaccine, or any of its ingredients. If you are allergic to 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 child?

Children should not have the nasal vaccine if they:

- are currently wheezy or have been wheezy in the past three days (vaccination should be delayed until at least three days after the wheezing has stopped)
- are severely asthmatic, ie being treated with oral steroids or high dose inhaled steroids
- have a condition, or are on treatment, that severely weakens their immune system or have someone in their household who needs isolation because they are severely immunosuppressed
- have severe egg allergy. Most children with egg allergy can be safely immunised with nasal flu vaccine. However, children with a history of severe egg allergy with anaphylaxis should seek specialist advice. Please check with your GP
- are allergic to any other components of the vaccine[3]

[1] ie born between 1 September 2014 and 31 August 2016
[2] ie born between 1 September 2008 and 31 August 2014
[3] see the website at xpil.medicines.org.uk and enter Fluenz Tetra in the search box for a list of the ingredients of the vaccine

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 because of this, they should have the flu vaccine by injection.

Also, children who have been vaccinated with the nasal spray 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.

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

Does the nasal vaccine contain gelatine derived from pigs (porcine gelatine)?

Yes. The nasal vaccine contains a highly processed form of gelatine (porcine gelatine), which is used in a range of many essential medicines. The gelatine helps to keep the vaccine viruses stable so that the vaccine provides the best protection against flu.

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

The nasal vaccine provides good protection against flu, particularly in young children. It also 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 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.

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 nhs.uk/child-flu-FAQ

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. Those having the injected vaccine may get a sore arm at the site of the injection, a low grade fever and aching muscles for a day or two after the vaccination. Serious side effects with either vaccine are uncommon.

Will the flu vaccine protect me completely?

Because the flu virus can change from year to year there is always a risk that the vaccine does not match the circulating virus. During the last ten years the vaccine has generally been a good match for the circulating strains.

How long will I be protected for?

The vaccine should provide protection throughout the 2018/19 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.

Speak to your GP or practice nurse, or alternatively your local pharmacist, to book a vaccination appointment and get the best possible protection. For pregnant women, the vaccine may also be available through maternity services. The flu vaccine is free. So make an appointment to receive the vaccine as soon as possible.

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 frontline health or social care worker, find out what arrangements have been made at your workplace for providing flu vaccination. It's important that you get protected.

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- and three- year-old children
- all children in reception class and school years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5
- 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.

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.

www.nhs.uk/flujab

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