



News Release

Wednesday 16 October 2013

Londoners urged to fight flu this winter

Public Health England (PHE) and NHS England are urging Londoners who are offered the flu vaccine to protect themselves this winter by ensuring they get vaccinated.

The flu vaccine is being offered to those who are most 'at risk' including people aged 65 and over, adults and children with long term health conditions, and pregnant women.

For the first time, all healthy two and three year olds (as of September 1 2013) are being offered a nasal spray flu vaccine. This marks the first step in an extension to the national flu vaccination programme which will eventually include yearly vaccination of all 2-16 year olds. Pilot programmes offering the flu vaccine to school age children are currently taking place in seven areas across the country including two in London - in Havering and Newham.

A study* published by PHE and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine found children are key "spreaders" of the flu virus. Two and three year olds are therefore being offered the nasal spray vaccine this year to not only protect themselves against flu but to help reduce the spread of flu to others, including those who are at increased risk of becoming seriously ill such as infants and older people.

The current rate of reported 'influenza-like-illness' in London is within 'baseline' levels at 10.2 per 100,000, slightly higher than the England rate at 6.4 per 100,000 (week 40 data). Baseline seasonal flu activity is considered under 20 per 100,000 in England, normal seasonal flu activity is between 20-70 per 100,000, and 'above average' activity is over 70 per 100,000.

Last season the rate of influenza-like-illness in London remained low until late December where it rose to 27 per 100,000, the highest rate relative to all other regions during the season. Outbreaks in London last season were primarily reported in schools prior to Christmas and among the elderly in care homes after Christmas.

Dr Yvonne Doyle, Regional Director for PHE London, said:

"People who have had flu would not describe it as just a bad cold. Flu is much more severe than the common cold and makes you feel too unwell to go about your usual daily activities.

"Last year in London the flu season was generally low and late with flu activity peaking in late December to late January. However the usual places affected by flu - like schools and care homes - were hit by outbreaks so now is the time for those who are at risk of flu to get vaccinated before the virus starts to take hold within the community.

"For the majority of people flu is an unpleasant illness but it can be very serious and even life threatening for older people and those who are at risk of developing complications. You are eleven times more likely to die from flu if you are in a clinical at risk group. I would therefore

urge everyone who is eligible to have the flu vaccine to get it done as soon as possible to help protect themselves and their families over the course of winter.”

Dr Andy Mitchell, Medical Director at NHS England (London), said:
“Flu is a nasty illness which can spread easily and it’s important that we improve the immunity of Londoners, particularly the elderly and anyone with a chronic condition. This year we have increased patient choice by providing more places where people can have the vaccine. Over 1,000 pharmacies across London are now offering the vaccine as well as GP practices. I would advise anyone in the key at-risk groups to get vaccinated now.”

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. Public Health England’s first weekly flu report shows current flu activity is low across the UK at the start of the season. PHE will publish a weekly flu report until May 2014, which will detail the flu viruses that are circulating together with information on the levels of influenza illness in the population:
www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/SeasonalInfluenza/
2. Influenza-like illness rates by **London borough** (published weekly):
www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1317140038829
3. Information on the two flu pilots for school age children in London:
Havering - www.havering.gov.uk/Pages/News/Council-and-GPs-encourage-local-people-to-take-the-jab.aspx
Newham - www.eastlondon.nhs.uk/News-Events/Press-Releases/2013/Newham-Primary-School-Children-to-Receive-Free-Flu-Vaccination.pdf
4. **Assessing Optimal Target Populations for Influenza Vaccination Programmes: An Evidence Synthesis and Modelling Study*
www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1001527
5. A national advertising campaign was launched by PHE on 11 October 2013 to encourage uptake of the flu vaccine.
6. Almost 800 people nationally were admitted to intensive care with complications of flu last year and each winter hundreds of thousands of people see their GP and tens of thousands are hospitalised because of flu.
7. The Government’s independent vaccine experts (Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation) advises that it wouldn’t be effective for the NHS to vaccinate every healthy person against flu. However people can still pay for the flu vaccine at their local pharmacy.
8. For further information about flu vaccination, including who should have it please visit www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/pages/who-should-have-flu-vaccine.aspx
9. For information on why health care workers should receive the flu vaccine please visit www.nhsemployers.org/HealthyWorkplaces/StaffFluVaccination/Pages/seasonal-flu-campaign.aspx
10. Public Health England’s mission is to protect and improve the nation’s health and to address inequalities through working with national and local government, the NHS, industry and the voluntary and community sector. PHE is an operationally autonomous executive agency of the Department of Health.

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