

The flu vaccination

Winter 2013/14

**Who should have it
and why**

**Includes information
for pregnant women**

Introduction

This leaflet explains how you can protect yourself 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 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 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 one that protects against four types is available in limited amounts in some areas.

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 if you have flu.

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 or emphysema
 - 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) or cerebral palsy
 - a problem with your spleen, for example sickle cell disease, or you have had your spleen removed.

Who should consider having a flu vaccination?

You should have the flu vaccination if you have any condition listed on page 4, or 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, or
- pregnant (see the next section).

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- or three-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.

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 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:

- reduces their risk of serious complications such as pneumonia, particularly in the later stages of pregnancy
- reduces the risk of miscarriage or having a baby born too soon or with a low birth weight
- will help protect their baby who will continue to have some immunity to flu during the first few months of its life
- will help protect any other children in the household.

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

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.

I think I've already had flu.

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.

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

Yes; the flu vaccine for this winter provides protection against some different strains of flu 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.

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.

Babies under six months of age should not have the flu vaccination even if they have an underlying condition. The flu vaccine does not work well in very young babies. 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, for the first time, children aged two or three years on 1 September 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. This will avoid the need to take time off work for flu or to look after their children with flu.

The vaccine for most children will be given as a spray in each nostril. Children aged six months to under two years with any of the conditions listed on page 4 will get an 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 programme see 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.

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?

There are some fairly common but mild side effects. Some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, and your arm may feel a bit sore where you were injected. Any other reactions are very rare. Children having the nasal vaccine may get a headache, a runny or blocked nose, and may experience general tiredness and some loss of appetite.

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 2013/14 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 October, 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.

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.

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 OK because you had one last year.

For more information about how to protect yourself and your family this winter visit nhs.uk/winterhealth

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

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

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
- 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.

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