



Public Health
England

NHS

Large print version

The **flu** **WINTER 2020/21** vaccination
Who should have it and why

Includes information for children
and pregnant women



**HELP US
HELP YOU**
PROTECT AGAINST FLU

Flu **i**mmunisation
Helping to protect people,
every winter

The flu vaccination Who should have it and why Winter 2020 to 2021

Includes information for children and pregnant women

A leaflet from Public Health England and the NHS

Flu Immunisation – Helping to protect people, every winter

Help Us Help You – Protect against flu

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.

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 should 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.

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

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
- a 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)

People on the NHS Shielded Patient List for COVID-19 are all eligible for a free flu vaccine and it is really important this year that they receive it.

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.

We want to reduce the chances of those vulnerable to COVID-19 from getting flu.

Who should consider having a flu vaccination?

All those who have any condition listed in the previous section, 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 someone on the NHS Shielded Patient List
- a frontline health or social care worker
- pregnant (we tell you more about this in the next section)
- children of a certain age (we tell you more about this in a later section)

This year, more people will be offered the free flu vaccine later in the autumn. To find out who is included check [nhs.uk/flu-vaccine](https://www.nhs.uk/flu-vaccine)

Why are household contacts of those on the NHS Shielded Patient List being offered flu vaccine this year?

We want to keep those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 well this winter and we do not want them to catch flu. In order to reduce the chance of a person who has an underlying health condition catching flu from members of their household we will be offering them the flu vaccine. If you live with someone who is on the NHS Shielded Patient List, or if you expect to share accommodation with them on most days over the winter, making close contact unavoidable, then you should ask for a free flu vaccine.

By having the vaccination, household contacts of the shielded can reduce their chances of getting flu and spreading it to the person they live with who is more vulnerable.

Will the flu vaccine protect me against COVID-19?

The flu vaccine won't protect you against COVID-19. But it will help protect you against flu, which is an unpleasant and potentially serious infection that can cause complications leading to hospital admission.

Helping to protect against flu is particularly important with COVID-19 in circulation because people vulnerable to COVID-19 are also at risk of complications from flu.

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 their 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 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.

Will I be safe when I go for the flu vaccine if COVID-19 is still around?

While COVID-19 is in circulation, providers of flu vaccination will have measures in place to keep you safe. Staff giving the vaccine will be wearing protective equipment to protect both you and themselves from the virus. Appointment times may also be scheduled to reduce numbers in the waiting area or you may be asked not to arrive early.

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 previously, 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:

- children aged two or three years old on 31 August 2020
- primary school-aged children
- year 7 secondary school-aged children

Children aged two and three years will be given the vaccination at their general practice usually by the practice nurse. Nearly all school- aged children 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 website information at [nhs.uk/child-flu](https://www.nhs.uk/child-flu)

Which type of flu vaccine should I have?

There are several types of flu vaccine. You will be offered one that is most effective for you, depending upon your age, from the following:

- children aged 2 to 17 are offered a live vaccine as a nasal spray. The live viruses have been weakened so it cannot give you flu.
- adults aged 18 to 64 are offered an injectable vaccine. It is an inactivated vaccine that does not contain any live viruses and cannot give you flu. There are different types available depending on how they were manufactured.
- adults aged 65 and over are offered an injected vaccine. It is an inactivated vaccine that does not contain any live viruses and cannot give you flu. Usually, you will be offered one that contains an adjuvant that helps the immune system create a stronger response to the vaccine. It is offered to people in this age group because as people age their immune system responds less well to vaccines.

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 licensed for children under the age of two.

Some children over the age of two who are in a high-risk group will also need to have an injected vaccine if the nasal spray vaccine is not suitable for them.

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 nurse, GP or pharmacist 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 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 children?

Children may not be able to have the nasal vaccine if they:

- are currently wheezy or have been wheezy in the past 72 hours, they should be offered a suitable injected flu vaccine to avoid a delay in protection
- have needed intensive care due
 - to asthma or
 - egg allergic anaphylaxis

(Children in these two groups are recommended to seek the advice of their specialist and may need to have the nasal vaccine in hospital)

- 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
- are allergic to any other components of the vaccine. For a list of the ingredients of the vaccine visit www.medicines.org.uk/emc/product/3296/pil

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.

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. The nasal vaccine is offered to children as it is more effective in the programme than the injected vaccine. This is because it is easier to administer and considered better at reducing the spread of flu to others, who may be more vulnerable to the complications of flu.

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 people may not accept the use of porcine gelatine in medical products. You should discuss your options with your nurse or doctor.

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 current 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.

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 in the earlier section 'Am I at increased risk from the effects of flu?', including children and babies over six months of age
- all pregnant women, at any stage of pregnancy
- all two- and three- year-old children (provided they were aged two or three years old on 31 August of the current flu season)
- all children in primary school
- all Year 7 secondary school-aged children
- everyone living in a residential or nursing home
- everyone who cares for an older or disabled person
- household contacts of anyone on the NHS Shielded Patient List
- all frontline health and social care workers

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

More people will be offered the free flu vaccine later in the autumn. To check if you are eligible go to **[nhs.uk/flu-vaccine](https://www.nhs.uk/flu-vaccine)**

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.

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Product code 3079111D1LP

Public Health England gateway number: 2020106

This is a large print version of the Flu vaccination leaflet 3079111D1

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For more information please visit:

www.nhs.uk/flu vaccine