



## News Release

**Strict embargo: 00.01hrs**

**Monday 6 October 2014**

### **Public Health England and NHS prepare for unpredictable flu season**

#### ***At-risk audiences urged to take up free flu vaccination***

PHE's national seasonal flu campaign launches from today, encouraging uptake of the influenza (flu) vaccine among the most at-risk groups. The campaign – across press, radio and online channels – targets people of all ages with a health condition, pregnant women and parents of children aged 2 to 4.

Each winter hundreds of thousands of people see their GP and tens of thousands are hospitalised because of flu. Last winter, PHE received reports of 904 people admitted to intensive care or high dependency units with laboratory confirmed flu and, of them, 11% (98 people) died.<sup>1</sup>

This does not account for the many deaths where flu is not recognised or reported - estimates of the annual number of deaths attributable to flu range from 4 to 14,000<sup>2</sup> per year, with an average of around 8,000 per year.

For most healthy people, flu is an unpleasant but usually self-limiting disease with recovery taking up to a week. However, older people, the very young, pregnant women and those with a health condition, particularly chronic respiratory conditions such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease, or those with a weakened immune system are at particular risk from the more serious effects of flu.

People with flu are approximately 11 times more likely to die if they have an underlying health condition than if they don't.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, only 52% of people aged 6 months to 65 years living with an underlying condition putting them at risk of severe infection took up the offer of the free flu vaccine during 2013/14.

Pregnant women are encouraged not to put off the free flu vaccination this winter. Pregnancy naturally weakens the body's immune system and as a result, increases the risk of a mother and unborn baby becoming seriously ill from flu.

Since 2013, 2 and 3 year olds have been eligible for flu vaccination with a newly available nasal spray, and this year the spray is also being offered to 4 year olds. However, nearly half (48%) of mums are not aware of this quick, effective and painless way to protect children from flu<sup>4</sup> with uptake only around 40% in 2-3 year olds in 2013/14.

Last year's flu season was less severe than some we have seen but flu is an unpredictable virus and it is impossible to predict the impact of the disease and how many serious cases there might be as new strains might circulate each year with varying intensity. This reinforces the need for annual flu vaccination among these key groups – including those aged 65 and over who have historically good uptake rates at around 75%.

The national campaign is being launched to encourage those eligible for the vaccine free on the NHS to contact their GP or pharmacist.

**Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer, said:**

“Flu is a really unpleasant illness, particularly for our most vulnerable patients and it is essential that people take steps to protect themselves during the winter months. I would urge those who are offered the free flu vaccination to visit their GP early in the flu season. I also urge all health care workers to make they are vaccinated to protect themselves, their patients and their families”.

**Dr Paul Cosford, Director for Health Protection and Medical Director at Public Health England said:**

“The nasal spray is quick, easy and painless way to help prevent pre-school age children catching flu and the vaccine also helps to reduce the spread of flu to those who are more vulnerable.

“People with certain long-term health conditions are at much greater risk of becoming seriously unwell if they catch flu and sadly, many end up in hospital. The best way people can protect themselves from flu is to take up the offer of free vaccination from their GP as soon as it becomes available. Even people whose health conditions are well managed and who lead otherwise healthy lives should still have the flu vaccine – it's free because you need it.

“Last year, around 40 per cent of pregnant women protected themselves and their baby from flu by getting vaccinated. This year we want to see more pregnant women and their babies protected. . Women can safely have the vaccine at any point during pregnancy and it can reduce the risk of complications such as pneumonia and premature birth, that can arise as a result of flu.”

**Dr Carol Cooper, leading GP and media medic, said:**

“Flu is often underestimated and can sometimes be very serious. This campaign is about raising awareness among those eligible for the free vaccine - including engaging parents of children aged 2-4. I am often surprised by the low uptake of the flu vaccination within certain groups, and there is a great need for more awareness to ensure those eligible take up the offer. For example, mums of children aged 2-4 may not know about the nasal spray vaccine, a quick, effective and painless option, which eliminates the need for needles. Immunisation is an important way to stay healthy and that's why campaigns to raise awareness of flu vaccination, such as this PHE activity, are so essential. I urge anyone at risk of flu to speak with their GP about protecting themselves and their families this season.”

The campaign includes:

- National press adverts aimed at adults with long-term conditions and pregnant women
- Radio adverts aimed at adults with long-term conditions and pregnant women
- Search marketing aimed at all of our at risk groups

ENDS

### Notes to Editors

1. Interview opportunities with Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer, Dr Paul Cosford, PHE's director for health protection and, medical director, Dr Nick Phin, PHE's head of flu and Dr Mary Ramsay, PHE's head of immunisation
2. Interview opportunities with Peter Andre and Emily MacDonagh who are supporting the campaign
3. Case studies are available
4. The seasonal flu campaign will launch on 6 October and will run for 4 weeks. The national campaign will consist of radio, press and digital search, supported by PR.
5. PHE exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. It does this through advocacy, partnerships, world-class science, knowledge and intelligence, and the delivery of specialist public health services. PHE is an operationally autonomous executive agency of the Department of Health. [www.gov.uk/phe](http://www.gov.uk/phe). Follow us on Twitter @PHE\_uk
6. **Kate Davies OBE Head of Public Health NHS England said:**

"I would strongly encourage people in the at risk groups and parents of two to four year olds to get their free flu vaccinations to make sure all the family is protected throughout the winter. Just ask your GP or pharmacist for details."
7. **Dr Penny Woods, Chief Executive, British Lung Foundation, said:**

"Flu can knock anyone off their feet. But for those with a long-term health condition, such as COPD, it can be much more serious, causing their symptoms to worsen and increasing their chances of getting pneumonia.

"Speaking to your GP surgery to get your free flu vaccination is one of the effective ways anyone living with a lung condition can help keep themselves healthy and happy throughout the winter. That's why the British Lung Foundation fully supports Public Health England's seasonal flu campaign."
8. **Clare Jacklin, Director of External Affairs for the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society, said :**

"Protecting against flu is critical for anyone living with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). RA is an incurable auto-immune condition which puts people living with RA at an increased risk of developing serious complications as a result of contracting influenza. Research suggests that only about half of those eligible for a free flu vaccination actually take up the option. If you suffer from RA make sure you stress the importance of having a flu jab and book an appointment with your GP.

“The National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society very much welcomes this PHE seasonal campaign as it will help raise awareness of the benefits of the flu vaccine and hopefully will mean more of those who are eligible speak to their GP as a matter of urgency.”

**9. Peter André, TV Star and father of 3 who is backing PHE’s seasonal flu campaign, said:**

“I’m sure every parent will agree that it’s horrible to see your children poorly as you just want to protect them from pain and suffering. The flu vaccination is an easy way to make flu less likely to occur in those you love and to minimise the risk of it spreading to more vulnerable people such as those with long-term health conditions. The new nasal vaccine for little ones means that children can be vaccinated quickly, effectively and painlessly. Don’t put off getting the flu vaccine!”

**10. Emily MacDonagh, trainee doctor said:**

“As a medical student and new mum, I can’t emphasise enough the importance of the flu vaccinations, particularly for young children, pregnant women and those with long-term health conditions. Many pregnant women don’t know how important the flu vaccine is; it minimises the risk of complications and your child carries immunity with them once they’re born. If you’re eligible to receive the vaccine for free, don’t put it off. It’s free because you need it so speak to your GP or pharmacist about it.”

For more information, contact:

PHE press office - infections  
61 Colindale Avenue  
London  
NW9 5EQ

Email: [infections-pressoffice@phe.gov.uk](mailto:infections-pressoffice@phe.gov.uk)

Phone: 020 8327 7901

Out of hours: 020 8200 4400

## References

---

<sup>1</sup> Surveillance of influenza and other respiratory viruses in the UK: Winter 2013 to 2014 [report](#). Page 13.

<sup>2</sup> Green et al (2013). Mortality Attributable to Influenza in England and Wales Prior to, during and after the 2009 Pandemic. PLoS ONE 8(12): e79360. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0079360

<sup>3</sup> Surveillance of influenza and other respiratory viruses in the UK. Winter 2010 to 2011 [report](#). Page 50, table 9

<sup>4</sup> TNS Seasonal Flu survey (pre) - Mums of 2-4 year olds