

Does your son
or daughter have
a long-term
condition?

Getting them
vaccinated can
protect your child
from flu

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Why is my child being offered flu vaccine?

If your child suffers from certain types of illness then catching flu can be serious. Your child may not be able to fight off flu as effectively as other children can or it might make their existing condition worse.

These conditions include:

- serious breathing problems, for example, severe asthma needing regular inhaled or oral steroids
- serious heart conditions
- severe kidney or liver disease
- diabetes
- immunosuppression due to disease or treatment, for example, chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment for cancer or long-term steroid use, and
- problems with the spleen, either because the spleen has been removed (asplenia) or doesn't work properly, for example, because of sickle cell or coeliac disease.

Your GP may also recommend that your child is vaccinated against flu if they have a condition that affects the nervous system such as cerebral palsy.

If you are not sure whether your child needs a flu vaccination or you need more advice, speak to your practice nurse, GP or health visitor.

What is flu?

Flu is an illness caused by the influenza virus. It is most common during the winter months.

People often describe colds as flu, but the symptoms of flu come on very suddenly and are much more severe than a cold.

Flu symptoms are:

- a high fever
- a shivery feeling
- a headache
- an aching body; and
- extreme tiredness.

A dry cough, sore throat and stuffy nose are also common with flu.

How is flu spread?

Flu spreads very quickly by coughs and sneezes from people who are already carrying the virus.

Touching objects such as toys that have been coughed or sneezed on can also pass it on to other people.



How will flu affect my child?

Flu lasts for about a week, during which time your child will be off their food, may feel very unwell and want to stay in bed. Even after the infection has gone, it may take much longer for your child to fully recover. Flu can also be followed by other infections, such as pneumonia, bronchitis, ear infections (otitis media) and sinusitis.

What is the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine protects against those types of flu virus that your child is most likely to come across each winter. Different flu viruses are around each winter, so a new vaccine has to be produced each year. The vaccine protects against flu but not against other respiratory infections such as the common cold.

There are two basic types of flu vaccine available – one is a live vaccine that is given as a nasal spray, and the other is an inactivated vaccine that is given as an injection in the arm or leg.

Can the flu vaccine cause flu?

No, the vaccine viruses are inactivated (killed), or attenuated (weakened) in such a way that they cannot cause flu illness.

When should my child have the flu vaccine?

Children with long-term conditions can have the inactivated flu vaccine injection from six months of age. For the live nasal vaccine it is two years of age.

The best time to have the vaccine is between September and early November so that your child is protected before flu starts circulating. If your child is under nine years of age, in a clinical risk group and is having the flu vaccine for the first time, they will need two doses about one month apart in order to get the best protection.

How effective is the vaccine?

Both types of vaccine give good protection. But the live nasal vaccine is more effective, likely to protect for longer and to work better against a broader range of strains of influenza virus.

Will my child have to have flu vaccine every year?

Yes. The viruses that cause flu change every year, which means the flu vaccine has to change as well. So, your child will need to be immunised each year before the new flu viruses start circulating in the winter.



How soon does the vaccine start to work and how long will protection last?

The flu vaccine may take up to 10 to 14 days to reach full protection. Protection usually lasts for the flu season; longer if the live nasal vaccine is used.

Are there any side effects from the vaccine?

Your child may get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days following immunisation as their immune system responds to the vaccine. If they have had the injection, then their arm may be a bit sore for a day or two where it was given. Children given the nasal vaccine can get a stuffy/runny nose for a couple of days.

Can children who are allergic to eggs have the flu vaccine?

If your child has an egg allergy, there are certain flu vaccines which should not be given to them. Speak to your doctor if your child has had a previous reaction to eggs, or if you are unsure.



Are there any other reasons why my child shouldn't have flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine should not be given to people who have had an anaphylactic reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine or any part of the vaccine (including neomycin, kanamycin and gentamicin – antibiotics which may be present in tiny amounts).

The nasal vaccine should not be given to those with certain immunodeficiencies or those with severe asthma.

Your GP will be able to advise whether a suitable alternative vaccine is available. As with other immunisations, vaccination should be delayed if your child has a high fever and should be given when they have recovered. This is to avoid the fever being associated with the vaccine, or the vaccine increasing the fever your child already has.

However, if your child has a minor illness without a fever, such as a cold, they should have their immunisation as normal.

Does the flu vaccine contain thiomersal (mercury)?

Some of the inactivated flu vaccines contain traces of thiomersal, which is used as a preservative. If you want more information about thiomersal in vaccines, speak to your practice nurse, health visitor or GP, or visit www.mhra.gov.uk

Vaccines with a trace of thiomersal are as safe and effective as those without thiomersal.

Does the flu vaccine contain gelatin?

Children with long-term conditions are particularly at risk if they get flu, so it's important that they are protected by having the vaccination. Gelatin is used in many medical products and the nasal flu vaccine contains traces of gelatin derived from pigs. There is an injected flu vaccine available to high risk children that does not contain gelatin but, because it's not as effective, the nasal vaccine is preferred for these children, unless they can't have it for medical reasons.

If you are concerned, speak to your GP to decide on the best way to protect your child.

Can the flu vaccine be given at the same time as other vaccines?

Yes, the flu vaccine can be given at the same time as the routine childhood vaccines and at the same time as the pneumococcal vaccine. Injectable vaccines should be given at a separate site, preferably in a different limb.

The nasal vaccine is a live virus and other live vaccines can be given at the same time.

What should I do if my child gets flu?

You should make sure that your child rests and drinks plenty of fluids. You can give them paracetamol liquid or ibuprofen liquid to help with any fever or pain, but be sure to check the dosage instructions on the packaging.

What if I'm still worried about my child's condition?

If:

- you are worried about your child
- the flu symptoms are severe, or
- you think that the flu is making your child's existing condition worse

Speak to your doctor or call 111.

If you can't contact your doctor, follow your instincts and go to your nearest hospital emergency department. Flu is a virus, so antibiotics will not work unless the flu has led to a bacterial illness that needs treatment.

Other immunisations your child may need

Check with your GP, practice nurse or health visitor about other immunisations. If your child is at particular risk of flu they may also be at high risk of other diseases such as pneumococcal infection. So, as well as all the routine childhood immunisations, your child may be eligible for some other vaccines.

**Never give aspirin
to children under
16 years old**

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