

SEASONAL FLU

Why you should have the vaccination

Flu. Protect yourself and others.



You may have heard a lot recently about different sorts of flu virus, including seasonal flu and swine flu. This leaflet explains the differences between them; who is more likely to be affected by seasonal flu; and why it is very important that people should still have their free seasonal flu vaccination.

WHAT IS SEASONAL FLU?

Seasonal flu is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. It occurs every year, usually in the winter. The most likely viruses can be identified in advance and vaccines are then produced that closely match them. Vaccination is available to help protect people who are more at risk.

WHAT HARM CAN SEASONAL FLU DO?

For fit and healthy people seasonal flu can range from having symptoms similar to a cold to developing more serious illnesses such as bronchitis and pneumonia, which may need hospital treatment. If people already have a serious disease, flu can be much worse. People sometimes think a bad cold is the flu, but having flu is often much worse than a cold: symptoms include fever, chills, headache, aching muscles, cough and sore throat. And because flu is a virus, antibiotics won't treat it.

Some people are more susceptible to the effects of seasonal flu. For them it can increase the risk of more serious illnesses such as bronchitis and pneumonia, or can make existing conditions worse. In the worst cases, seasonal flu can result in a stay in hospital, or even death.

If you are at an increased risk from seasonal flu it is important that you have your seasonal flu vaccination. The vaccines are normally available from the beginning of October, but this depends on manufacturing.

Arrange to see your GP or practice nurse, or alternatively your local pharmacist, in the autumn and get the best possible protection.

ARE YOU AT GREATER RISK FROM THE EFFECTS OF SEASONAL FLU?

Even if you feel healthy, you should definitely consider having the **free** seasonal flu vaccination if you have:

- a heart problem
- a chest complaint or breathing difficulties, including bronchitis and emphysema
- a kidney disease
- lowered immunity due to disease or treatment (such as steroid medication or cancer treatment)
- a liver disease
- had a stroke or a transient ischaemic attack (TIA)
- diabetes
- a neurological condition, e.g. multiple sclerosis (MS) or cerebral palsy
- a problem with, or the removal of, your spleen, e.g. sickle cell disease.

Paid and unpaid carers are also eligible for the seasonal flu vaccine, so that they stay healthy in order to benefit those they look after.

If you are pregnant and in an at-risk group, you can still have the seasonal flu jab. There are no reported problems from giving the vaccine to pregnant women.

You should also have the seasonal flu vaccination if you are aged 65 years or over, live in a residential or nursing home, or are the main carer for an older or disabled person.

CHILDREN

If you have a child who has one of the conditions listed on page 3, or who has previously been admitted to hospital with a chest infection, they may not be able to recover from seasonal flu as well as other children can. They are more likely to be very ill if they catch seasonal flu, and it could make their existing condition worse. Talk to your GP or practice nurse about your child having the seasonal flu vaccination.

CAN THE FLU VACCINE BE GIVEN TO YOUR CHILD AT THE SAME TIME AS OTHER VACCINES?

Yes, the seasonal flu vaccine can be given at the same time as the routine childhood vaccines and at the same time as pneumococcal vaccine. The vaccination should be delayed if your child has a fever, but it can be given if they have a minor illness such as a cold.

IS THERE ANYONE WHO SHOULDN'T HAVE THE VACCINATION?

Most people can have the vaccine, but you should not be vaccinated if you have had a serious allergy to the vaccine in the past, or if you have a serious allergy to hens' eggs.

If you have a fever, it is best to delay the vaccination.

A SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION IS YOUR BEST PROTECTION

The vaccination will help your body to fight the flu virus. Your body starts making antibodies against the viruses about a week to ten days after the injection. These antibodies help to protect you for a whole year against similar seasonal flu viruses that you may come into contact with.

The seasonal flu vaccination will not protect you against:

- swine flu
- the common cold
- other winter viruses.

THE SEASONAL FLU VACCINE IS VERY SAFE

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 side effects are rare.

Side effects of the vaccination are minor compared with the risks associated with seasonal flu. The vaccine does not contain any live viruses, so it cannot give you flu.

WILL THE SEASONAL FLU VACCINE PROTECT ME COMPLETELY?

Most people who have the seasonal flu vaccination will not get seasonal flu. However, like any vaccine, it does not give 100 per cent protection. Out of every 100 people who have the vaccine, 70 to 80 will be protected, while the others are more likely to get milder symptoms.

If you remain at increased risk of seasonal flu in the future, you should have the seasonal flu vaccination every year. Because the viruses change every year, the seasonal flu that is around this year will be sufficiently different from last year's to make people ill even if they had the vaccination last year. New vaccines are produced each year because they need to be changed to match the latest version of the virus in order to best protect you.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

If you belong to one of the groups mentioned in this leaflet (and you are not allergic to hens' eggs, to the vaccine, or to one of its ingredients), speak to your GP or practice nurse about being vaccinated. Alternatively, you can get advice from your local pharmacist or see page 7 for further information.

It is best to have the seasonal flu vaccination in the autumn before any outbreak of seasonal flu. Remember that you need it every year, so don't assume that you don't need another vaccination because you had one last year.

HOW IS SWINE FLU DIFFERENT FROM SEASONAL FLU?

Swine flu is a completely new virus to which very few people are likely to have immunity. It has occurred at a time of the year when seasonal flu isn't around, and may affect more people than seasonal flu. It might become more serious. The seasonal flu vaccination does not protect against swine flu.

The vaccine to protect against swine flu will be available later in the winter and the following people have been prioritised for vaccination in the following order:

- people aged six months and up to 65 years of age in the current seasonal flu vaccine clinical at-risk groups
- all pregnant women (depending on the licence for the vaccine)
- household contacts of immunocompromised people
- people aged 65 years and over in the current seasonal flu vaccine clinical at-risk groups.

If swine flu vaccine is available then you may be offered it as well as the seasonal flu vaccine, because both vaccines can be given at the same time. A separate information leaflet will be provided to advise about the swine flu vaccination.

For further information, visit:

England

www.nhs.uk

Scotland

www.nhs24.com

www.scotland.gov.uk

Wales

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

www.wales.gov.uk/immunisation

Northern Ireland

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

www.nidirect.gov.uk