

SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION: WHO SHOULD HAVE IT AND WHY

**This leaflet includes information
for pregnant women**

Winter 2011/12

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 risk have their free seasonal flu vaccination every year.

WHAT IS SEASONAL FLU?

Seasonal flu occurs every year, usually in the winter. It's a highly infectious disease caused by a number of flu viruses. The most likely viruses that will cause flu each year are identified in advance and vaccines are then produced to closely match them.

As with most seasonal flu vaccines, this year's vaccine will protect against three types of flu virus.

ISN'T FLU JUST A HEAVY COLD?

No. Colds are much less serious and usually start gradually with a stuffy or runny nose and a sore throat.

HOW DO I KNOW WHEN I'VE GOT FLU?

Flu symptoms hit you suddenly and sometimes severely. They usually include fever, chills, headaches and aching muscles, and you can often get a cough and sore throat at the same time.

Flu is caused by viruses and not bacteria, so antibiotics won't treat it.

WHAT HARM CAN SEASONAL 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 seasonal 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, seasonal flu can result in a stay in hospital, or even death.

AM I 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 or 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, 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.

Don't wait until there is a flu outbreak this winter: contact your GP or practice nurse now to get your seasonal flu jab.

WHO ELSE SHOULD CONSIDER HAVING A SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION?

You should have the seasonal flu vaccination if you are:

- aged 65 years or over
- living in a residential or nursing home
- the main carer of an older or disabled person
- a frontline 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.

I AM PREGNANT. DO I NEED A FLU VACCINATION THIS YEAR?

All pregnant women, at any stage of pregnancy, should be offered the seasonal flu vaccine. This is because pregnant women are more prone to complications from flu, which can cause very serious illness for both the mother and her baby. There are several reasons for this:

- During pregnancy, a woman's natural immunity to infection is reduced in order to prevent the baby being rejected and so they may be more likely to get seriously ill if they get flu.
- As the womb increases in size, the lungs get squashed so the woman may not be able to breathe as deeply as before. This increases the risk of infections such as pneumonia that can follow flu.
- The H1N1 virus seems to affect younger people in particular (older people already have some immunity to it), so pregnant women make up a bigger proportion of those with complications than is the case with other strains of flu.

For all these reasons, pregnant women should have the flu vaccination at any stage of their pregnancy. Importantly, having the vaccination when pregnant helps protect their baby from flu over the first few months of life.

I AM PREGNANT, HAVEN'T HAD THE VACCINATION AND THINK I MAY NOW HAVE FLU. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

You should talk to your doctor urgently, because if you do have flu, the antivirals he or she will prescribe for you need to be taken very soon after the first symptoms appear. As you won't know which flu virus has caused your flu, you should then have the vaccination to protect you against the other flu viruses as soon as the illness has gone.

Talk to your GP or midwife if you are unsure about what vaccination you should have.

I HAD THE SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION LAST YEAR. DO I NEED ANOTHER FLU JAB THIS YEAR?

We do not know how long last year's vaccination will last and 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 who has one of the conditions listed above, especially a serious respiratory or neurological condition, they should have a seasonal flu vaccination. These children are more likely to become more 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 MY CHILD AT THE SAME TIME AS OTHER VACCINES?

Yes. The seasonal 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 of the seasonal flu vaccines available 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 in the past.

If you have a serious allergy to hens' eggs you can still be vaccinated under specialist clinical supervision.

If you have a fever, the vaccination may be delayed until you are better.

WHY IS A SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION MY BEST PROTECTION AGAINST FLU?

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 seasonal flu viruses that you may come into contact with.

The seasonal 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.

WILL THE SEASONAL FLU VACCINE PROTECT ME COMPLETELY?

Most people will be protected against flu by having the vaccination. And while the vaccine does not give 100 per cent protection, if you have the vaccination and still go on to get flu you are much less likely to have serious complications.

HOW LONG WILL I BE PROTECTED FOR?

The vaccine should provide protection throughout the forthcoming flu season.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO NOW?

If you belong to one of the groups mentioned in this leaflet (and you are not allergic to the vaccine), it's important that you have your seasonal flu vaccination. The vaccines are normally available from the beginning of October, but this depends on the manufacturing process.

Speak to your GP or practice nurse, or alternatively your local pharmacist, in the autumn to book a vaccination appointment and get the best possible protection.

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 is best to have the seasonal flu vaccination in the autumn before any outbreaks 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.

For more information about how to protect yourself and your family this winter visit [nhs.uk/winterhealth](https://www.nhs.uk/winterhealth)

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

Summary of those who are recommended to have the seasonal flu vaccine:

- everyone aged 65 or over
- everyone under 65 years of age (including children, and babies of six months and older) who has a condition listed on page 4
- all pregnant women, at any stage of pregnancy
- everyone living in a residential or nursing home
- everyone who cares for an older or disabled person
- all frontline health and social care workers.

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