

Flu Fact sheet

The carers' registration form now includes a statement stating that carers are eligible for a Free Flu Vaccine each year. Thank you for including this statement in the registration process. This sheet will hopefully provide further information in case the carer asks a question about the flu vaccine. If the required information is not on the sheet, please advise the carer to discuss their query with a pharmacist or their GP.

NHS choices: Flu vaccination information:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/vaccinations/Pages/flu-influenza-vaccine.aspx>

Flu vaccination is available every year on the NHS to help protect adults and children at risk of flu and its complications.

Flu can be unpleasant, but if you are otherwise healthy it will usually clear up on its own within a week.

However, flu can be more severe in certain people, such as:

- anyone aged 65 and over
- pregnant women
- children and adults with an underlying health condition (such as long-term heart or respiratory disease)
- children and adults with weakened immune systems

Anyone in these risk groups is more likely to develop potentially serious complications of flu, such as pneumonia (a lung infection), so it's recommended that they have a flu vaccine every year to protect them.

1. Who is eligible?

If you look after a friend or relative who can't get by without your help, you will be eligible for the flu vaccine for **FREE**.

2. When to have the Flu Vaccine?

The best time to have a flu vaccine is in the autumn, from the beginning of October, but don't worry if you've missed it then, you can have the vaccine later in winter. Ask your GP or pharmacist.

3. Where can I get vaccinated?

You can have your free flu jab at your **GP surgery** or **participating pharmacy** from October each year. Ask your GP when they are running clinics, or your local pharmacy if they are offering this service.

4. Who should seek advice before having the jab?

If you have had a previous allergic reaction to a flu vaccination or you have a hen's egg allergy you should seek advice before having the flu jab.

5. What side effects may I experience?

After the flu jab you may get a mild fever and slight muscle aches for a day or so.

If you have a sore arm after the vaccination, try these tips to ease the discomfort:

- continue to move your arm regularly – don't let it get stiff and sore
- take a painkiller, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen – pregnant women shouldn't take ibuprofen unless a doctor recommends and prescribes it
- do not give aspirin to children under 16

Serious allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) to flu vaccines are very rare. Healthcare staff giving vaccinations are fully trained to deal with anaphylaxis and, with prompt treatment, individuals make a quick and complete recovery.

Contact a pharmacist or your GP if you experience severe side effects that are not improving over time.

6. Who is entitled to a nasal spray vaccination?

- Children aged two to eight years on 31st August 2017
- Children aged two to under 18 years with certain long-term health conditions

Myth Busters:

There are many myths surrounding flu and the flu vaccine. Here are the most common flu myths and the truths behind them. If a carer has further questions you could ask the carer to discuss these with their local pharmacy or GP.

1. 'Flu isn't a serious illness, people don't die of flu, flu is just a bad cold'

A bad bout of flu is much worse than a heavy cold.

For the majority of people who catch it, flu is unpleasant but not life-threatening. Flu symptoms come on suddenly and sometimes severely. They include fever, chills, headaches and aching muscles, as well as coughs and a sore throat. You're likely to spend two or three days in bed.

However, for some people, it can lead to chest infections, severe complications and even death. Flu spreads very easily.

2. 'The flu vaccine gives me flu'

It's impossible to get flu from having the flu vaccine because the vaccine doesn't contain live viruses. A very small number of people experience side effects.

For the most part, flu vaccine side effects are mild. The most common side effect is soreness around the site of the injection and, occasionally, aching muscles. These symptoms are a lot less serious than flu symptoms.

3. 'The flu vaccine doesn't work'

The World Health Organization says that clean water and vaccination are the two interventions that have the greatest impact on public health – vaccination works. Flu vaccination is the best protection we have against an unpredictable virus that can cause unpleasant illness in children and severe illness and death among at-risk groups, including older people, pregnant women and those with an underlying medical health condition. Flu vaccines generally give 60–80 per cent protection against infection.

Flu is unpredictable and over time, protection from the injected flu vaccine gradually decreases and flu strains often change. So new flu vaccines are produced each year which is why people advised to have the flu jab need it every year too. It is not possible to fully predict the strains that will circulate each year, and there is always a risk of change in the virus as was seen in 2014/15. However, this does not happen very often. The vaccine still provides the best protection we have against an unpredictable virus that can cause severe illness.

4. 'The flu vaccine isn't safe'

The vaccine is one of the safest in the world, the risk of having a serious (anaphylactic) reaction to the flu vaccine is less than one in a million, much lower than the risk of getting seriously ill from actually catching flu. If you have had a serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to a flu vaccine before, please talk to a clinician before getting vaccinated. If you have a serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to hens' eggs, you should ask about vaccines with a very low egg content and be vaccinated under clinical supervision.

Seasonal flu vaccine is given to millions of people in the UK each year. The specific strains of flu that are included may change from one year to the next, but vaccines are still thoroughly tested and are safe.

5. 'I only need to have the flu vaccine once in my lifetime as it protects me for life' / 'I've already had flu this year so I don't need a vaccination' / 'All health professionals do not need flu vaccination as they build up a resistance to it'

There's no such thing as natural immunity to flu.

As flu is caused by several viruses that can change each year, you will only be protected by the immunity you developed naturally against one of them. You could go on to catch another strain, so it's recommended you have the jab even if you've recently had flu and that you have the vaccine every year so that it matches the new viruses.

6. 'If you haven't been vaccinated by November, it's too late' / 'The flu vaccine provides immediate protection against the flu'

It's not too late and it may take 10-14 days for your immunity to build up fully after you have had a flu vaccination.

It's better to have the flu vaccine as soon as it becomes available, usually in October, but it's always worth getting vaccinated before flu comes around right up until March.

7. 'I feel fine so I don't have flu and people can only spread the flu when they are showing symptoms such as sneezing or feeling unwell.'

Not everyone who catches the flu is ill. Some people have no symptoms at all but can still pass the virus on.

Vaccination isn't just about keeping yourself safe, it's also about protecting your family, your friends, neighbours, and people you work or volunteer with. You can carry and pass the virus on to others without having any symptoms yourself so, even if you consider yourself healthy, you may be risking the lives of others.

8. 'The flu vaccine cannot be given to pregnant women'

Pregnant women can have the flu vaccination at any stage of their pregnancy. If you are pregnant, you could get very ill if you get flu, which could also be bad for your baby. Having the jab can also protect your baby against flu after they're born and during the early months of life.

9. 'Washing my hands does not stop me spreading the flu virus'

It's vital to follow universal infection prevention procedures and wash your hands regularly. Although, once flu has been passed on to your family, colleagues or your patients, clean hands won't keep flu at bay.

10. 'Flu can be treated with antibiotics and antivirals are replacing the flu vaccine'

Flu can't be treated with antibiotics. Antibiotics only work against bacteria, and flu is caused by viruses. A bacterial infection may occur as a result of having flu, in which case you may be given antibiotics.

You may be prescribed antiviral medicine to treat your flu. Antivirals do not cure flu, but they can make you less infectious to others and reduce the length of time you may be ill. To be effective, antivirals have to be given within a day or two of your symptoms appearing.

11. 'A healthy diet and vitamin C can prevent flu'

Your diet could help to boost your immune system, but eating well will not protect you from flu. Many people think that taking daily vitamin C supplements will stop them getting flu, but there's no evidence to prove this.

Sources:

- NHS England presentation, 2016
- NHS Choices website

This Flu Fact Sheet was created as part of the B&NES, Swindon and Wiltshire STP programme to promote flu vaccination

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