

25 million to be offered free NHS flu jab this winter

A trio of England's top medics have today (Friday 4 October) urged those at risk of suffering from or spreading flu to ensure they get their free NHS vaccination this winter.

The health service in England has prepared for its largest ever flu protection drive to help keep people well and ease pressure on urgent care services over the colder months.

The number of people eligible has topped 25 million this year as the offer of the vaccine is now extended to all primary school aged children – an extra 600,000 children. NHS commissioned school vaccination teams, maternity services, general practices and local pharmacies are all now gearing up to provide vaccines to primary school aged children, 2 and 3 year olds, those with underlying health conditions, pregnant women and older adults (aged 65 years and over).

Employers of frontline health and social care workers also have a responsibility to ensure their staff can get the free vaccine. A record number of NHS staff – almost 3 quarters of a million, or 70.3% of frontline workers – took up their workplace jab last year.

Professor Yvonne Doyle, Medical Director at Public Health England (PHE), said:

Every winter there is always the threat of a bad flu season. Flu is a serious illness and can even be deadly for the most vulnerable of our population.

That's why it's vital that we are prepared and always working to offer people better protection.

This year, more vaccines are available and every primary school child will be offered a flu vaccine. Children are 'super spreaders' of flu. Flu vaccination not only protects the children but it also protects other more vulnerable members of the community from a potentially horrible illness.

If you or your child are in an eligible group, make sure you get a flu vaccine. It's the best defence we have against an unpredictable virus.

Professor Stephen Powis, National Medical Director at NHS England, said:

People might think that flu is just a cough or cold, but actually

this serious illness can have devastating effects on people including causing death in some cases.

NHS services across England have been working hard to prepare for the winter season, including staff in every part of the country getting their flu jab in the coming weeks, so now we're appealing to the public to Help Us, Help You by ensuring that you, your children or relatives take up the free and convenient flu vaccine as soon as you can.

This year, a wider range of flu vaccines are available which should offer better protection. This includes the 'adjuvanted' vaccine which was offered to those aged 65 years and over for the first-time last year. The adjuvanted vaccine provided a higher level of protection compared to the standard non-adjuvanted vaccines in this age group last year.

In addition, a new cell-based vaccine which protects against 4 strains of flu (quadrivalent) will also be available. As the vaccine virus is grown in cells, rather than eggs, this avoids the changes that can occur when using eggs in the manufacturing process (egg adaptation). There is increasing evidence in recent seasons that egg adaptation may mean that vaccines do not work as well, particularly against the A(H3N2) virus strain. This vaccine should offer better protection for older people against flu than standard-dose, non-adjuvanted vaccines that are grown in eggs. The cell-based vaccine has been recommended for both older adults and for under 65s with underlying health conditions and pregnant women. Children will continue to be given the nasal spray vaccine unless they have a medical condition that means they should receive the injectable version.

Professor Jonathan Van Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England, said:

Flu is a potentially fatal illness and one that can spread quickly. Alongside frontline healthcare workers, tens of millions of over-65s, children and adults in at-risk groups will be offered the vaccine this year and I would urge them, and those that care for them, to ensure this free opportunity is taken up in the coming weeks.

Having the vaccine is the single best way to protect against flu and will be an important step in preventing not only you, but your family, friends and colleagues from this debilitating illness.

Flu vaccination is the single best defence against what can be a serious illness. Flu is a highly infectious disease and can lead to serious complications particularly for people with underlying health condition such as COPD, bronchitis, emphysema, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease or a chronic neurological disease like multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy and some learning disabilities. Flu on top of health conditions like these increases the chance of serious health complications resulting in a hospital visit.

NHS England is funding vaccines for social care and hospice workers, with older adults more vulnerable and liable to suffer more than most people if they do catch flu. Protecting children is also crucial for protecting the rest of the population as they tend to be 'super spreaders' of flu due to poorer hand hygiene.

Eligible adults are encouraged to get their free vaccine from their GP or pharmacy to help protect themselves and their families before flu reaches its seasonal peak.

As well as getting the vaccine, practising good hand hygiene by catching coughs and sneezes in a tissue, throwing it away and washing your hands after can help limit its spread – catch it, bin it, kill it.

For further information please contact:

NHS England and NHS Improvement works closely with PHE and the Department of Health and Social Care to provide and commission a range of public health services. This includes commissioning of flu immunisation services to a standard that will prevent the infections and outbreaks caused by flu viruses.

People who are eligible for the NHS flu vaccine this year include:

- those aged 65 and over
- those aged 6 months to 64 with a long-term health condition
- children aged 2 to 3 (on 31 August 2019) via their GP practice
- school children in years reception, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6
- pregnant women
- health and social care workers
- carers

Adults with chronic conditions need the flu vaccine because people with respiratory diseases like COPD, emphysema or asthma are seven times more likely to die if they catch flu compared to healthy adults, and people with cardiovascular problems like chronic heart disease or angina, or have had a stroke, are 11 times more likely to die. The risk is far worse for those with chronic liver disease, who are 48 times more likely to die if they get flu. Read [Green Book, Chapter 19](#).

PHE manages the supply and distribution of children's flu vaccines. For all other eligible populations, local providers (such as GPs and pharmacies) remain responsible for ordering vaccines directly from manufacturers for all eligible populations.

Flu is a viral infection that is spread through coughs and sneezes. Most people recover with rest in a week, but people with chronic conditions or who are over 65 should call NHS 111. Doctors may prescribe antivirals in some cases which can help speed up recovery but is not a cure.

Getting the vaccine from the NHS if you are eligible and practising good hand hygiene is the best way to prevent yourself from getting flu.

The flu vaccine typically starts to be distributed from September. The vaccine is offered through local GPs, pharmacies and within NHS school age immunisation programmes.

We cannot predict with certainty which strains will circulate in the UK this winter. The WHO makes recommendations for the composition of the northern hemisphere flu vaccine every year, and this is published 6 months in advance to allow for vaccine production times.

The cell-based quadrivalent vaccine which PHE and the NHS are recommending this year for people aged 65 and over and adults with underlying health conditions was licenced for use in this age group in January 2019. It has previously been used in other countries.

Reported end of season flu vaccine effectiveness for 2018 to 2019 against all strains was:

- 44.3% (95% CI 26.8, 57.7) across all ages
- 48.6% (95% CI -4.4, 74.7) for 2 to 17 year olds live attenuated influenza vaccine ('children's nasal spray') only
- 44.2% (95% CI 21.3, 60.5) for 18 to 64 year olds (any vaccine)
- 49.9% (95% CI -13.7, 77.9) for those aged 65 and over (any vaccine)
- 62% (95% CI 3.4, 85.0) for those aged 65 and over (adjuvanted trivalent influenza vaccine only)

Help Us Help You

PHE's annual flu marketing campaign will run from early October into the beginning of November and will focus on pregnant women, parents of children aged 2 and 3 years old and adults with underlying health conditions. The campaign is part of the wider Help Us Help You winter campaign.

Help Us Help You encourages people to take appropriate actions, be that getting the flu vaccination or accessing the appropriate service, to better enable the NHS to help them.

It is an overarching brand which unifies a family of campaigns incorporating messages about flu, staying well in winter, NHS11, pharmacy and GP extended hours.

The campaigns will consist of TV, radio and digital advertising supported by search and partnership activity.