

Government responds to recent reports on seasonal influenza vaccines options

A spokesman for the Department of Health (DH) today (April 15) said that the Government has all along been committed in encouraging members of the public to receive seasonal influenza vaccination (SIV). Currently, over 1.8 million doses of SIV had been administered under various Government SIV programmes, representing an increase of 20 per cent comparing with the same period last year. For children aged between 6 months and below 18 years of age, about 533 700 doses of SIV have been administered reaching a record high and an increase of about 36.8 per cent comparing to last year. This remarkable record was attributed to the collaborative efforts of different parties. In view of the recent reports on nasal vaccines usage, the DH stressed that annual survey has been conducting to gather feedback from enrolled doctors and schools in the school outreach programmes so as to make reference to the preference of participating schools when procuring vaccines.

Arrangement and limitation of live attenuated influenza vaccine (i.e. nasal vaccine) (LAIV)

According to recommendations of the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases (SCVPD) under the Centre for Health Protection of the DH, overseas research and clinical experience generally showed that both injectable inactivated influenza vaccines (IIV) and nasal LAIV are safe and both vaccines can offer comparable protection to the receivers. There is no scientific evidence supporting the priority use of nasal LAIV thus far.

In order to increase the SIV rate of the public (including school children), the DH has been implementing various vaccination schemes to provide free or subsidised SIV for eligible persons. According to the current arrangement under the SIV School Outreach (Free of Charge) Programme, kindergarten and child care centres can choose to receive injectable IIV or nasal LAIV, while primary schools and secondary schools can arrange injectable IIV.

According to the findings of the latest survey conducted in 2023 against schools and doctors participating in the school outreach programmes, only 26 per cent of kindergartens and child care centres chose to use nasal LAIV. Sufficient vaccines have been provided to those kindergartens and child care centres which chose nasal LAIV.

Also, kindergarten, child care centres, primary and secondary schools can discuss with outreach doctors on the provision of injectable IIV or nasal LAIV during the Vaccination Subsidy Scheme School Outreach (Extra Charge Allowed) activities. Parents can also arrange subsidised SIV at clinics of private doctors under the Vaccination Subsidy Scheme (VSS) for children and adolescents aged six months to less than 18 years. Private doctors enrolled in the VSS can also decide to use injectable IIV or nasal LAIV. According to the above survey, only 9 per cent of primary schools and 7 per cent of

secondary schools chose to use LAIV nasal spray. According to previous experience, schools and medical institutions participating in the outreach programme would make reference to parents' choices and side effects and contraindications of influenza vaccines to choose the vaccines provided in the outreach vaccination programme.

In the 2022/23 season, the Government procured 22 500 doses of nasal LAIV for various SIV programmes/schemes, of which 17 400 doses were administered for students. The remainder of around 5 100 doses were unused and disposed of, resulting in vaccine wastage of around 22.7 per cent, which was higher than the 13.1 percent vaccine wastage for IIVs.

The spokesman reiterated that persons suitable for receiving IIV and LAIV vaccine are different. There are more restrictions for receiving nasal spray vaccines with more points to note, and the shelf-life is also shorter. Nasal LAIV are not applicable to persons who are pregnant, immunocompromised or with other contraindications, e.g. children 2 years through 4 years who have asthma or who have had a history of wheezing in the past 12 months; and concomitant aspirin or salicylate-containing therapy in children and adolescents.

Historic high number of vaccination doses received by children in 2023/24

A total of over 1.8 million doses of SIV had been administered under various Government SIV programmes, representing a 20 per cent increase when comparing with the same period of last year. With the DH's publicity effort, the number of students receiving SIV in 2023/24 has significantly increased compared to last year. As at April 7, under the Government Vaccination Programme, about 533 700 doses of SIV have been administered for children aged between 6 months and below 18 years of age, reaching a record high and increased by about 36.8 per cent comparing to last year. The overall vaccine coverage rate has reached 52.5 per cent, which has marked an increase of 13 per cent for the same period last year.

The DH will continue to maintain close communication with stakeholders (including doctors and schools) to actively explore more options for SIV vaccination arrangements. The DH will formulate the implementation details for the 2024/25 season, including the best mode of operation and types of vaccine to be provided, with reference to survey results against schools and doctors participating in the school outreach programmes of 2024, and latest recommendations and experience of SCVPD and health authorities of other areas.