

Most comprehensive flu programme in UK history will be rolled out this winter

- Expanded flu vaccination programme to protect vulnerable people and support the NHS
- Free vaccine to be made available for people aged 50 to 64 later in the year
- Households of those on the shielded patient list eligible for free flu vaccination and school programme expanded to the first year of secondary schools for the first time

The most comprehensive flu vaccination programme in the UK's history has been announced by the government today (Friday 24 July).

A significant new group will be eligible for the free flu vaccine as people aged 50 to 64 will be invited later in the season for a vaccination.

As part of an unprecedented drive, a free flu vaccine will also be available to:

- people who are on the shielded patient list and members of their household
- all school year groups up to year 7
- people aged over 65, pregnant women, those with pre-existing conditions including at-risk under 2s

Once vaccination of the most 'at-risk' groups is well underway, the department will work with clinicians to decide when to open the programme to invite people aged 50 to 64, with further details to be announced. The NHS will contact people directly, including information about where to go to get the vaccine.

The expanded flu vaccination programme is part of plans to ready the NHS – both for the risk of a second peak of coronavirus cases, and to relieve winter pressures on A&E and emergency care.

Increased vaccinations will help to reduce pressure on the NHS this winter by preventing flu-sickness which can cause hospitalisation and even death.

This announcement comes alongside the £3 billion for the NHS announced by the Prime Minister earlier this month to relieve winter pressures on A&E and emergency care in case of a second spike in infections.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

It's mission critical that we pull out all the stops to get ready for winter, and the Prime Minister has already announced £3 billion to protect the NHS.

We are now taking another important step to help protect the wider public by giving the flu vaccination to more people than ever before. This will be the biggest flu vaccination programme in history, and will help protect our NHS as we head into winter.

If you are eligible for a free vaccine, whether it's for the first time or because you usually receive one, then I would urge you to get it, not just to protect yourself, but to protect the NHS and your loved ones, from flu.

The flu can be a serious disease, especially for vulnerable people or those with underlying health conditions.

Eligible groups are urged to get their free vaccine every year. However with COVID-19 still in circulation, this year's campaign will be particularly vital to protect the most vulnerable and reduce the number of people needing flu treatment from the NHS.

Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty said:

Flu can have serious consequences and vulnerable people can die of it. Having the vaccine protects you, and helps reduce transmission to others.

This winter more than ever, with COVID-19 still circulating, we need to help reduce all avoidable risks. Vaccinating more people will help reduce flu transmission and stop people becoming ill.

Seasonal flu is an illness that can be spread by children among themselves and to adults. Last year, the flu programme was expanded to include all primary school aged children for the first time, and this year teams will be visiting secondary schools to vaccinate children in year 7. This will help to contain the spread of this year's seasonal flu and not only protect children but also vulnerable adults they may be in contact with.

Dr Vanessa Saliba, Head of Flu at PHE said:

The flu vaccine is the best defence we have against what can be a serious and even deadly illness.

This winter, more people than ever will be offered a free flu vaccine. We are urging anyone who is eligible to take up the offer of vaccination. By getting the jab, you can help protect yourself, your family and the NHS – it will help save lives.

Dr Nikki Kanani, GP and NHS medical director for primary care, said:

Getting a free NHS flu vaccination is a quick and simple way that

people can help to save lives and reduce pressure on our hardworking frontline staff this winter.

GPs, nurses, community pharmacists and others will be going to great lengths this year to give this vital protection to millions more people in a safe and convenient way, so when the time comes I would urge everyone invited for a flu vaccination to get it as soon as possible.

All frontline health and social care workers will also be urged to get their free vaccine to protect themselves and their patients or residents from the flu.

The announcement of the flu vaccination programme expansion is part of the government's plan to support the NHS and protect the public this winter.

The funding, which is available immediately, will allow the NHS to continue using additional private hospital capacity and maintain the Nightingale hospitals until the end of March.

This will provide additional capacity for COVID-19 patients should it be needed, and allow the NHS to carry out routine treatments and procedures.

PHE's annual flu report quotes the total number vaccinated in 2019 to 2020 was 15,344,033. This covers over 65, those in clinical at risk groups, pregnant women, children aged 2 to 3, all primary school aged children, and healthcare workers.