

People with long-term health conditions urged to get flu vaccine before Christmas

Health chiefs, and a coalition of charities, are urging people with long-term health conditions to get the [flu vaccine](#) before the virus starts to circulate. Public Health England (PHE) analysis shows 6 in 10 deaths from flu are seen in people with underlying conditions.

A coalition of charities, including the British Heart Foundation and Mencap, are joining PHE and the NHS in urging them to get vaccinated before Christmas.

Flu is a highly infectious disease and can lead to serious complications for those living with a long-term health condition, including:

- respiratory and heart conditions
- diabetes
- kidney disease
- liver disease
- chronic neurological disease like multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy

People with chronic respiratory diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema or asthma, are 7 times more likely to die if they catch flu compared to healthy adults. People with cardiovascular problems, such as chronic heart disease or angina, or who have had a stroke, are 11 times more likely.

Some people with certain long-term health conditions may not view themselves as being at increased risk of serious illness from flu, especially if their condition is not related to the respiratory system. However, people with chronic liver disease and immunosuppression are 48 and 47 times more likely, respectively, to die from flu compared to healthy adults.

So far this year, 46.8% of people with a long-term health condition (under the age of 65 years) have had the flu vaccine. While vaccine coverage in this group is higher than it has been at this point compared to the last 6 flu seasons, it still lags behind coverage in other eligible groups. This year, we have already achieved the highest ever recorded flu vaccine uptake among older people.

Uptake also varies greatly between the different at risk groups. Last year, it was highest in people with diabetes at 61.2% and lowest in people with a BMI over 40 at 30.9%.

Over the last 5 years, flu has killed an average of 11,000 people in England each year, but the figure has ranged from around 4,000 deaths in the 2018 to 2019 season to more than 22,000 deaths in 2017 to 2018.

This year, with those most vulnerable to flu also being at high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19), it is more important than ever that eligible people get the flu vaccine.

Dr Vanessa Saliba, Head of Flu at Public Health England said:

The flu vaccine is the best defence against what can be a serious illness, especially for those living with long-term health conditions, such as respiratory diseases, diabetes and liver disease.

People living with long-term health conditions are also at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19, and having both flu and COVID-19 at the same time is associated with a greater risk of more severe illness and death. Therefore, it is more important than ever to get vaccinated against flu.

People aged 6 months to 65 years with one or more long-term health conditions, pregnant women and those aged 65 years and over are at a greater clinical risk from flu. All these groups are eligible for a free vaccine, which is the best defence against flu. From 1 December, 50 to 64 year olds also became eligible for the first time.

Public Health Minister, Jo Churchill, said:

The flu vaccine is there to protect as many people as possible, especially those living with long-term health conditions who carry a higher risk of falling seriously ill.

This winter with COVID-19 circulating, it's more important than ever that all those eligible get their jab. Our brilliant GPs and pharmacists are delivering the vaccine to record numbers and if you are contacted by your GP, make sure you take the opportunity to get your free flu vaccination.

Dr Nikki Kanani, Medical Director of Primary Care in England, said:

As well as kicking off the world-first COVID-19 programme this week, the NHS continues to offer essential flu vaccines for those who need it, and it's especially important that those most at-risk, including with long-term conditions, get vaccinated.

We have written to eligible patients inviting them to get vaccinated without delay, and NHS services have put a range of measures in place to minimise any risk of COVID-19.

Dr Michael Brady, Medical Director at Terrence Higgins Trust, said:

We strongly encourage people living with HIV to visit their GP or local pharmacy for a quick, painless flu jab this winter. Research shows that HIV is associated with an increased severity of flu and greater risk of complications relating to that. Being on effective HIV treatment reduces the possibility of hospitalisation because of flu, but it's still better to get the protection of the flu jab, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when infection with both viruses could cause additional problems.

Vanessa Hebditch, Director of Policy and Communications at the British Liver Trust, said:

The liver is a vital weapon in our body's armoury for fighting infection. If the liver is damaged, our bodies find it much harder to fight off illnesses of all kinds, including the flu. Liver disease has many different causes, but any kind of long-term damage to this organ, no matter what the cause, can leave people more prone to infection.

Many people with chronic liver disease don't realise that they are at much higher risk of serious illness or even death if they were to catch the flu. The shocking statistics speak for themselves. That's why it's so important people with long-term liver disease take steps to protect themselves by getting their winter vaccinations.

Dr Keith Brownlee, Director of Policy, Programmes and Support at the Cystic Fibrosis Trust said:

We urge everyone with cystic fibrosis and their families to protect themselves by getting the flu jab. Everyone with cystic fibrosis is at higher risk of being seriously unwell from the flu, and flu can also cause long term damage. However every year lots of people miss out on getting their jab which is an important layer of protection against becoming ill so don't delay, get the jab.

Karen Davies, Senior Clinical Advisor at Diabetes UK, said:

Flu can be incredibly serious, and people with diabetes are particular vulnerable to serious complications if they get it. Getting flu can make your diabetes harder to manage and can cause your blood sugar levels to rise dangerously high. With the coronavirus pandemic still posing a very real threat, it's incredibly important that people with diabetes stay well and stay out of hospital. That's why this year, more than ever, it is so important that people with diabetes take up the offer of a free flu jab.

We know all flu jab providers will be facing increased demand this year. But we want to reassure people that there are a number of options available to them to get their jab, that include their GP surgery or their local pharmacy. The jab can take up to 2 weeks to be effective, so we're urging everyone with diabetes to get booked, and get vaccinated, as soon as possible.

If anyone needs advice on how or where to get a flu jab, our helpline is available on 0345 123 2399, Monday to Friday from 9am to 6pm, or you can find more information on diabetes and flu at [diabetes.org.uk](https://www.diabetes.org.uk).

Ismail Kaji, Parliamentary Support Officer at the learning disability charity Mencap, who has a learning disability, said:

It's very important people with a learning disability get the flu vaccine to stop them getting ill, especially as many people with a learning disability also have health conditions which means they could become very unwell. And while you should get it every year, it's more important than ever this winter because of coronavirus – and it's also free for people with a learning disability and their main carer. You can keep you and those around you safe.

If you're feeling nervous, remember you can ask for reasonable adjustments to get the support you need. You can ask for more time in the appointment and for the nurse to explain everything clearly to you, and show you the equipment they will use to help you feel more comfortable.

People with a learning disability can have more health problems than other people and can find it harder to get the healthcare they need, so it's a good idea to get as much protection as possible. The flu jab can help with this so make sure you get it done this winter.

Barbara Kobson, Senior Cardiac Nurse at the British Heart Foundation, said:

With the COVID-19 pandemic still looming, getting your flu jab is as vital as ever, especially if you have a heart and circulatory condition or are older. It only takes 5 minutes and reduces your chances of catching flu, which can exacerbate conditions such as coronary heart disease and heart failure. Getting the jab will mean you're also supporting the NHS as it may stop you becoming ill and needing treatment at a time when hospitals are under immense pressure from a potential winter rise in COVID-19 cases.

Jessica Kirby, Head of Health Advice at Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation, said:

One in five people in the UK has a long-term lung condition, including asthma and COPD, making them more likely to develop the most severe symptoms of the flu, which is more likely to be fatal for people with health conditions.

We'd urge everyone who is eligible for a free flu vaccine to get one as soon as possible and ideally before the Christmas break, when people are likely to mix in larger groups making it possible for the virus to spread more rapidly. For those who have been unable to get a vaccine due to shortages in their area, do keep trying as new stocks are becoming available. If you are unsure if you are eligible, our advice is to speak to your GP who can assess your individual risk.