

SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION: WHO SHOULD HAVE IT AND WHY

**This leaflet includes information
for pregnant women**

INTRODUCTION

Last year you probably heard a great deal about different sorts of flu, including seasonal flu and swine flu. This leaflet explains how you can protect yourself against flu this coming winter and why it's very important that people who are at risk have their free seasonal flu vaccination every year.

WHAT IS SEASONAL FLU?

Seasonal flu occurs every year, usually in the winter. It's a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. The most likely viruses that will cause flu each year are identified in advance and vaccines are then produced that closely match them.

The H1N1 virus that caused the 'swine flu' pandemic last year will still be around this winter, so this year's seasonal flu vaccine will include a vaccine to protect against this virus.

ISN'T FLU JUST A HEAVY COLD?

No. Colds are much less serious and usually start gradually with a stuffy or runny nose and a sore throat.

HOW DO I KNOW WHEN I'VE GOT FLU?

Flu symptoms hit you suddenly and severely. They usually include fever, chills, headaches and aching muscles, and you can often get a cough and sore throat at the same time.

Because flu is caused by viruses and not bacteria, antibiotics won't treat it.

Don't wait until there is a flu outbreak this winter: contact your GP or practice nurse now to get your seasonal flu jab.

WHAT HARM CAN SEASONAL FLU DO?

People sometimes think a bad cold is flu, but having flu is often much worse than a cold – you may need to stay in bed for a few days if you have flu.

Some people are more susceptible to the effects of seasonal flu. For them it can increase the risk of developing more serious illnesses such as bronchitis and pneumonia, or can make existing conditions worse. In the worst cases, seasonal flu can result in a stay in hospital, or even death.

AM I AT GREATER RISK FROM THE EFFECTS OF SEASONAL FLU?

Even if you feel healthy, you should definitely consider having the free seasonal flu vaccination if you have:

- a heart problem
- a chest complaint or breathing difficulties, including bronchitis or emphysema
- a kidney disease
- lowered immunity due to disease or treatment (such as steroid medication or cancer treatment)
- a liver disease
- had a stroke or a transient ischaemic attack (TIA)
- diabetes
- a neurological condition, for example multiple sclerosis (MS) or cerebral palsy
- a problem with your spleen, for example sickle cell disease, or you have had your spleen removed.

WHO ELSE SHOULD CONSIDER HAVING A SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION?

You should have the seasonal flu vaccination if you:

- are aged 65 years or over
- live in a residential or nursing home
- are the main carer of an older or disabled person, or
- are pregnant (see the next section).

Paid and unpaid carers should also consider having the seasonal flu vaccination to reduce their chances of getting flu. They can then continue to help those they look after.

I AM PREGNANT. DO I NEED A FLU VACCINATION THIS YEAR?

Yes, all pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy should be offered the flu vaccine this year, whether they received the swine flu vaccine last year or not.

Talk to your GP or midwife if you are unsure about what vaccination you should have.

I HAD BOTH THE SEASONAL AND THE SWINE FLU VACCINATIONS LAST YEAR. DO I NEED ANY FURTHER FLU JABS FOR THIS YEAR?

Yes. The viruses that cause flu change every year. This means some of the flu strains that will be circulating this winter will be different from last winter's. So the vaccine you need to protect you from these different strains will have to be different as well.

WHAT ABOUT MY CHILDREN? DO THEY NEED THE VACCINATION?

If you have a child who has one of the conditions listed above, or who has previously been admitted to hospital with a serious chest or respiratory condition, they should have a seasonal flu vaccination. These children are more likely to become ill if they catch seasonal flu, and it could make their existing condition worse. Talk to your GP or practice nurse about your child having the seasonal flu vaccination.

CAN THE FLU VACCINE BE GIVEN TO MY CHILD AT THE SAME TIME AS OTHER VACCINES?

Yes. The seasonal flu vaccine can be given at the same time as all routine childhood vaccines. The vaccination can go ahead if your child has a minor illness such as a cold but may be delayed if your child has an illness that causes a fever.

IS THERE ANYONE WHO SHOULDN'T HAVE THE VACCINATION?

Almost everybody can have the vaccine, but you should not be vaccinated if you have had a serious allergy to the vaccine in the past, or if you have a serious allergy to hens' eggs.

If you have a fever, the vaccination may be delayed.

Not all of the seasonal flu vaccines available are suitable for children. Please make sure that you discuss this with your GP beforehand.

WHY IS A SEASONAL FLU VACCINATION MY BEST PROTECTION AGAINST FLU?

The vaccination will help your body to fight flu viruses. Your body starts making antibodies against the viruses about a week to ten days after the injection. These antibodies help to protect you for a whole year against similar seasonal flu viruses that you may come into contact with.

The seasonal flu vaccine will not protect you against the common cold or other winter viruses.

WILL I GET ANY SIDE EFFECTS?

There are some fairly common but mild side effects. Some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, and your arm may feel a bit sore where you were injected. Any other reactions are very rare.

WILL THE SEASONAL FLU VACCINE PROTECT ME COMPLETELY?

Most people who have the seasonal flu vaccination will not get seasonal flu. However, like any vaccine, it does not give 100% protection. Out of every 100 people who have the vaccine up to 80 may be protected. The rest may have some protection that will reduce the severity of their symptoms.

HOW LONG WILL I BE PROTECTED FOR?

The vaccine should provide protection throughout the forthcoming flu season.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO NOW?

If you belong to one of the groups mentioned in this leaflet (and you are not allergic to hens' eggs or to the vaccine), it's important that you have your seasonal flu vaccination. The vaccines are normally available from the beginning of October, but this depends on the manufacturing process.

Speak to your GP or practice nurse, or alternatively your local pharmacist, in the autumn to book a vaccination appointment and get the best possible protection.

It is best to have the seasonal flu vaccination in the autumn before any outbreaks of seasonal flu. Remember that you need it every year, so don't assume that you don't need another vaccination because you had one last year.

For more information about how to protect yourself and your family this winter visit [nhs.uk/winterhealth](https://www.nhs.uk/winterhealth)

The flu jab is free. So make an appointment with your GP surgery.

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