

Immunising preschool children against flu

Information for practitioners working in early years settings, including childminders



This information is about the annual flu vaccination programme for preschool children. It is for those working in the early years sector to inform them about the programme and how they can support it. It is for nursery and preschool managers and staff, and childminders delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework and those who provide informal childcare, such as nannies. There is specific information about the programme available to parents and carers (further details are given below).

Background to the programme

Flu is a common infection in babies and children and can be very unpleasant for them. Children under the age of five have the highest hospital admission rates for flu compared to other age groups.

All children aged two and three years old on 31 August are eligible for a free annual flu vaccination in the form of a nasal spray. However, not all parents are aware of this or take up the offer. Not only does the flu vaccine help to protect the children themselves, but by reducing the spread of flu it will also help protect family members, and others in the local community.

What is flu?

Flu in children can cause fever, stuffy nose, dry cough, sore throat, aching muscles and joints, and extreme tiredness. This can often last several days. Some children can get a very high fever, sometimes without the usual flu symptoms, and may need to go to hospital for treatment. Serious complications of flu include a painful ear infection, acute bronchitis, and pneumonia.

Flu is different from the common cold. It is caused by a different group of viruses and the symptoms tend to start more suddenly, be more severe and last longer.

What is the purpose of the programme?

Annual immunisation helps provide protection to individual children and reduces the spread of flu to their families, younger siblings, grandparents and the wider community, protecting others who are at increased risk of becoming seriously ill from flu.

For many years the flu vaccine has been offered to those who are most at risk of severe illness from flu. This includes pregnant women, those aged 65 and over, and those with long term health conditions, including children.

Since 2013, vaccination has been extended gradually to children. The extension of the national flu immunisation programme to children is based on the advice from an independent expert committee, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, who advise the Government on vaccination policies.

Where can children get the vaccine?

All children who are aged two and three years old on 31 August 2017 can get the vaccine at their general practice. This is usually administered by the practice nurse and for most children is a quick and painless nasal spray.

There are some children for whom the nasal spray is not suitable.

GP practices will check suitability before offering the vaccine.



When do the vaccinations need to be given?

To be effective, vaccinations need to be given between October and December as this is before flu tends to circulate. Flu viruses can change year on year. Consequently, vaccines are made each year to provide protection against the flu viruses that are predicted to circulate, and therefore the vaccine needs to be given on an annual basis.

Can parents refuse to have their child vaccinated?

Yes. The vaccination is not mandatory. Parents will need to give their informed consent for the vaccination. The nasal flu vaccine contains a highly processed form of gelatine (derived from pigs). Some faith groups may or may not accept the use of porcine gelatine in medical products – the decision is solely one for the child's parents/guardians.

The role of the Early Years Sector

What can staff in the early years sector do to support the programme?

Staff working in the early years sector can help raise awareness of the programme amongst parents. Resources produced by Public Health England can be downloaded or ordered for free.

As well as protecting children and the wider community, promoting the flu vaccine promotes a healthy working environment in nurseries and childcare settings by reducing the risk of spread of flu to others including staff.

Can staff have the vaccine?

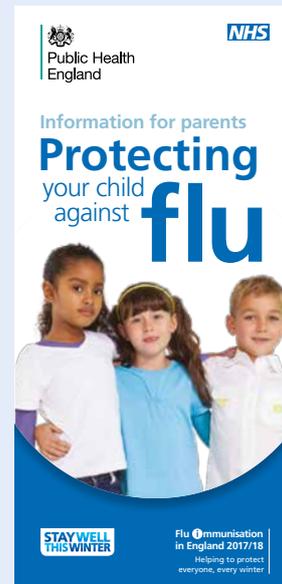
Not as part of this programme. The nasal flu vaccine used in this programme is not licensed for adults. Some early years providers, however, may choose to provide an injectable vaccine for their staff through their own occupational health services.

Staff with certain medical conditions that put them more at risk of flu, or who are pregnant, are entitled to free flu vaccination (injectable vaccine) through the NHS. Eligible staff should contact their GP practice. Some local pharmacies also provide this service.

For more information see www.nhs.uk/flujab

Resources

Public Health England has produced the following resources which can be downloaded or ordered for free from www.gov.uk/government/publications/flu-vaccination-leaflets-and-posters



'Protecting your child against flu' leaflet.

This provides information for parents on the flu vaccine, including how it works and contraindications.

'Five reasons to vaccinate your child against flu' poster. This sets out key messages for parents about the flu vaccine.



Other children who are offered flu vaccination

Are older children being offered flu vaccination in schools?

Yes, as part of the extension of the national flu immunisation programme to children all those in reception class and school years 1 to 4 will be offered flu vaccination this autumn. Most vaccination sessions will take place in school, with a few areas offering it through general practice. Over the next few years, the programme will be extended gradually to include children in other age groups.

In five areas around the country all primary school aged children will be offered the vaccine in former pilot areas.

What about children with long-term health conditions?

Children less than 2 years old, but over six months of age, with a long term health condition that puts them at increased risk of flu should also have annual flu vaccination. This includes children with serious breathing problems (such as severe asthma), serious heart conditions, severe kidney or liver disease, diabetes, immunosuppression or problems with the spleen. Children under the age of 2 will be offered an injected vaccine as the nasal spray is not licensed for them.



Preventing the spread of flu

You can help stop yourself catching flu or spreading it to others with good hygiene measures. The young children that you care for should also be encouraged to do the same:

- wash hands regularly with soap and warm water
- use tissues to cover the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- put used tissues in a bin as soon as possible

Regularly cleaning surfaces such as tables, telephone and door handles can also help to get rid of germs.

Anyone with flu should avoid unnecessary contact with other people until they are fully recovered.

