



# Protecting Health and Social Care Workers from Seasonal Influenza (Flu)



## What is seasonal flu?

Seasonal flu occurs every year, usually in the winter. People sometimes call a bad cold the flu, but having flu is much worse than a cold. Flu is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. Symptoms include fever, chills, headache, aching muscles, cough and sore throat - and because flu is a virus, antibiotics won't help. Vaccination is available to help protect people who are more at risk.

Even if people had flu or were vaccinated last year, they won't be protected this year as the viruses are always changing and a new vaccine is produced each year to match the new strains.



## Who is most at risk from flu?

Anyone can get flu but it is more serious for older people and people with some medical conditions, particularly certain heart or respiratory diseases and diabetes. Flu can lead to complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia which may need hospital treatment and can be life-threatening for people who are already ill.

## Why immunise health and social care workers?

Health and social care workers are at increased risk of infection, and vaccination may reduce the spread of flu in health and social care premises. This helps to:

- protect vulnerable patients and service users, including those who may already be unwell, may have a poor immune response or not respond well to their own immunisation;
- protect other health and social care staff; and
- make sure health and social care services are effective and efficient by minimising staff absence resulting from flu illness.

## Who should have the vaccine?

All health and social care staff who are directly involved in patient care in:

- general practice including dental practices;
- NHS hospitals;
- private hospitals; and
- residential care homes.

Examples of staff directly involved in patient care:

- clinicians, midwives and nurses;
- paramedics and ambulance drivers;
- occupational therapists, physiotherapists and radiographers;
- primary health care providers such as GPs, dentists, dental nurses, practice nurses, district nurses and health visitors;
- staff in nursing and care homes that look after older people;
- social care staff involved in direct patient care; and
- students and trainees in these disciplines and volunteers who are working with patients.

It does not include people who are not directly involved in face to face patient care. However, in some cases, an employer may still offer the vaccine to these staff.

## What is in the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine contains parts of two types of influenza A virus and one type of influenza B virus. The vaccine only protects for one year because flu viruses are continually changing. A new vaccination is offered each year to provide the best protection.

## Is the vaccine safe?

Seasonal flu vaccines are used throughout the world and have an excellent safety record. They are produced to match the viruses expected to be circulating in the winter.

Some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, and their arm may feel a bit sore where they were injected. Other reactions are extremely rare and health professionals giving the vaccinations are trained to deal with them.

## Can the flu vaccine cause flu?

No. The vaccine does not contain a live virus, so it cannot cause flu. Some people may experience mild flu-like symptoms for up to 48 hours as their immune system responds to the vaccine but this is not flu.

## When should the flu vaccine be given?

The earlier people have the vaccine the sooner they will develop protection. It is important that the vaccination is given before flu starts circulating each year and the vaccinations are normally available from the beginning of October. Those eligible for vaccination need to ask their employer about getting a flu jab as early as possible.

## How effective is the vaccine?

Flu vaccinations are effective but there are many different types of flu viruses and the vaccine will only protect against the most common ones. Also, the vaccination will not protect against coughs and colds.

Other viruses circulate every winter and while they cause flu-like symptoms they are not usually as serious as flu.

Most people who are vaccinated will not get the flu. However, like any other vaccine, it does not give 100 per cent protection. Out of every 100 people vaccinated, between 70 and 80 will be protected and the others are more likely to get milder symptoms.

## How does the vaccine work?

About a week to 10 days after having the vaccine your body makes antibodies to the vaccine viruses. These antibodies help to protect you against any similar flu viruses if you come into contact with them.

The protection lasts for about a year.



## Is there anybody who can't have the flu vaccine?

Most people can have the vaccine but they should not be vaccinated if they have had:

- an anaphylactic reaction (a severe allergic reaction that needs urgent medical attention) in the past; or
- a serious allergy to hens' eggs.

The health professionals giving the vaccinations will be able to answer any questions.

## Can the vaccine be given to pregnant women?

Yes. The flu vaccine is considered safe for pregnant women. Although for those at occupational risk only, it is still generally avoided in the first trimester of pregnancy. Flu illness may pose more of a health risk during pregnancy, so women with a medical condition that puts them at higher risk should still have the flu vaccine if they are pregnant.

## Where can health and social care workers get the vaccine from?

They should contact their occupational health department for more information. Those who work in primary health or social care should contact their employer.

## A note to employers

Every employer has an obligation to care for patients/residents in a safe environment. By offering staff involved in direct patient care flu vaccination an employer goes some way to meeting that responsibility. Also, it could prevent or reduce complications in patients/residents that would increase the burden on staff resources.

Employers can help ensure that staff can access vaccines easily. Consideration should also be given to the potential consequences where staff decline vaccination.

## What about the swine flu that's circulating now?

Swine flu is a completely new virus to which very few people are likely to have immunity. It can occur at any time of the year, affect more people than seasonal flu, and be more serious. The seasonal flu vaccine does not protect against swine flu.

The swine flu vaccine will be offered initially to those who are likely to need it most. Separate information will be provided about the vaccine and the vaccination programme.

## Leaflet availability

This bilingual leaflet is again available only on the Welsh Assembly Government immunisation website at:

**[www.wales.gov.uk/immunisation](http://www.wales.gov.uk/immunisation)**

and in the following languages:

Arabic	Lingala
Bengali	Polish
Bulgarian	Portuguese
Chinese	Punjabi
Czech	Russian
Farsi	Somali
French	Spanish
Gujarati	Swahili
Hindi	Tagalog
Kurdish (Sorani)	Urdu (Naskh)
	Vietnamese

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