

Immunising primary school children against flu

Information for head teachers and other school staff

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This information is for headteachers and school staff. It gives details about the nasal flu vaccine being offered to children in the autumn term of 2016. Parents/guardians will receive their own dedicated information at the appropriate time.

Background to the programme

This is to make you aware that your local healthcare team will be in contact during the summer term to ask for your support in planning this autumn's flu vaccination programme for school-aged children.

This year, all children in years 1 and 2 will continue to be offered flu vaccination and the offer is being extended to all those in year 3.

We would like to thank schools for their engagement and vital contribution to this programme which was successfully rolled-out last year. We hope that you will help us by continuing to support delivery of this programme through your school¹.

The role of schools and school staff

What is the purpose of the programme?

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. Flu can be a very unpleasant illness in children. Annual immunisation provides important protection to individual children and also reduces the spread of flu to their families and the wider community, protecting younger siblings, grandparents and others who are at increased risk of becoming seriously ill from flu.

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.

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The nasal flu vaccine

- Almost all eligible children will be able to have the vaccine as a nasal spray (up the nose), which is a quick and painless process.
- Serious side effects are uncommon but many children can develop a runny or blocked nose, headache, some tiredness or loss of appetite that lasts for a short period.
- The 'Protecting your child against flu' leaflet provides more information for parents on the vaccine, including how it works and contraindications

All questions on the suitability of the vaccine for individual children should be directed to the healthcare team. School staff will not be expected to answer questions about this programme.

When will schools be contacted?

Your local healthcare team should be in touch with you during the summer term to confirm arrangements with you for the autumn term. If you want more information and have not been contacted by your local healthcare team you can contact your local NHS England Regional Team: www.england.nhs.uk/about/regional-area-teams

¹ There are just a few areas in the country where provision will be through alternative schemes such as community pharmacies and general practice.

What will schools be asked to do?

Like last year, you will be asked to:

- work with the healthcare team to develop and agree the best approach for implementing the programme in your school. The more time that is given to planning, the more likely it is that the programme will run smoothly
- agree a date for the vaccination session and provide a suitable location for the immunisation to take place (e.g. school hall or classroom). The healthcare team will agree their specific requirements with you
- agree a process for providing parents with the invitation letter, information leaflet and consent form.

Schools may be asked to help with the tasks that cannot easily be done by the healthcare team such as sending information home with children, collecting completed consent forms, and taking children to and from the vaccination session where necessary. Local healthcare teams will work with schools to ensure minimum disruption.

Delivery of the programme will be dependent on local circumstances, commissioning arrangements and schools agreeing to host the vaccination session. Where schools do not host sessions, and four-year-olds already at school are being invited through general practice, then children may need to be released from school to receive their vaccine elsewhere.

Who will be giving the vaccine to the children?

The programme will be delivered by a healthcare team including nurses, healthcare support workers and administrative staff. They may be part of the school health service, or from a specialist immunisation team. The healthcare team will administer the vaccination and will work to nationally set standards. Staff will have appropriate qualifications and training, including safeguarding training.

How will parent/guardian consent be obtained?

Like last year, parental consent will be arranged via a letter, information leaflet and consent form that the healthcare team will provide. Ideally this will be sent home from school with the child.

It should be signed by parents or guardians and returned to the healthcare team by the deadline agreed with the team. In most cases the healthcare team will ask that parents return these forms to the school and the healthcare team will collect them from there.

How will the healthcare team identify the children to be vaccinated?

The healthcare team will have a list of all eligible children for whom consent has been received. They may ask the class teacher or assistant to confirm the identity of younger children before giving the vaccination.

Who decides whether a child receives the vaccination?

Parents or guardians with parental responsibility make this decision. Only children for whom consent has been received will be vaccinated. The healthcare team will make all decisions regarding whether a child should receive the vaccination on the day, taking into account information on the consent form and, for example, whether the child is well at the time.

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 healthcare team will provide an information leaflet with each consent form and their contact details for additional parental queries.

What happens if a child is not present on the day when vaccination is offered in the school?

This will depend on local arrangements and the healthcare team will discuss second opportunity arrangements with you and parents.

Benefit to schools

- Helps protect children against flu which in turn may help protect other pupils and staff and reduce absenteeism rates
- Promotes a healthy working environment in schools and the wider community, including amongst parents
- The engagement in public health programmes, including vaccination, is recognised by OFSTED as being important and will help with requirement for schools to evidence they are meeting criteria pertaining to personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE)
- Provides an opportunity to integrate learning about the benefits of vaccination into the school curriculum including history and science

What should be done if a child becomes unwell after receiving the vaccination?

If the healthcare team is still on site, seek advice directly from them. If the healthcare team have left the site, manage according to existing policies for pupil sickness in school and contact the healthcare team to ensure they are aware and can report any event related to the timing of administration of the vaccine.

Can teachers have the vaccine?

Not as part of the programme. The nasal flu vaccine used in this programme is not licensed for adults. Some schools, however, may choose to provide an injectable vaccine for their teachers 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.

Why are only children in school years 1, 2 and 3 being offered the vaccine in the majority of areas?

The extension of the national flu immunisation programme to children in school years 1, 2 and 3 is part of a phased roll-out of flu immunisation to children, based on the advice of independent experts. More birth cohorts will be included in future as the programme expands.

Are pre-school children being offered flu vaccination in general practice?

Yes, all children who are aged two, three and four years old on 31 August 2016 will be offered flu vaccination through general practice.

Why are all primary school age children being offered the vaccine in some areas?

Five areas around the country piloted the programme from 2013 to 2015. These areas will continue to offer the vaccine to all primary school-aged children.

Further information

Further updates on the national flu immunisation programme, including the extension of the programme to children, will be added to the Public Health England website in the lead up to the 2016/17 flu season at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/annual-flu-programme

For more information on the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation see: www.gov.uk/government/groups/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation

