



Guidance Immunising preschool children against flu

Updated 28 September 2020

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This information is about the annual flu vaccination programme for pre-school 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.

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 5 have the highest hospital admission rates for flu compared to other age groups.

All children aged 2 and 3 years old on 31 August 2020 are eligible for a free 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 painful ear infections, 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.

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. Helping to protect them against flu is particularly important this year if COVID-19 is still circulating because people at risk from flu are also vulnerable to the complications of COVID-19. To further extend this protection, the vaccination programme will be extended to 50 to 64 year olds later in the year.

Where children can get the vaccine

All children who are aged 2 and 3 years old 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 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 people may not accept the use of porcine gelatine in medical products. They should discuss the options with their nurse or doctor.

The role of the early years sector

What staff in the early years sector can 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 (PHE) 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 [visit NHS/UK](#)

Other children who are offered flu vaccination

All children in primary school and those in Year 7 of secondary school will be offered flu vaccination this autumn. Most vaccination sessions will take place in school.

Children with long-term health conditions

Children less than 2 years old, but over 6 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.

Why children who live with those on the NHS shielded patient list are being offered flu vaccine

This year, we want to keep those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 well this winter and do not want them to catch flu. In order to reduce the chance of a person who has an underlying health condition catching flu from members of their household, we will be offering them the flu vaccine. This includes children.

If your child lives with someone who is on the NHS shielded patient list, or you expect your child to share accommodation with them on most days over the winter, making close contact unavoidable, then they should have the vaccine. If they are not in a group being offered it at school, you should ask your GP surgery.

If that household member is someone with a very severely weakened immune system, the GP practice might offer an injection rather than the nasal spray.

Preventing the spread of flu

You can help stop yourself from 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.

Resources

PHE has produced the following resources which can be downloaded or ordered for free from the [Health Publications website](#)

- 5 reasons to vaccinate your child against flu poster – this sets out key messages for parents about the flu vaccine.
- protecting your child against flu leaflet – this provides information for parents on the flu vaccine, including how it works and contraindications. This is also available to [download in other languages](#). Translated versions are download only.

Visit the [Health Publications website](#) to order paper copies and if you require print-ready versions to print large quantities locally.

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Copies of printed publications and the full range of digital resources to support the immunisation programmes can now be ordered and downloaded online. Login to register and place your order.

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