

Influenza immunisation programme 2025/26

Factsheet for healthcare practitioners

Morbidity and mortality due to influenza can cause winter pressures within the healthcare system and major harm to individuals, particularly vulnerable people. Since 2020, we have faced the double threat of COVID-19 and influenza. Studies show that for some people with both COVID-19 and flu virus, there is an increased risk of complications and death. Each year the flu vaccine protects against the most common strains of flu likely to be circulating and it is more important than ever to be sure to get the flu vaccine this year. Most people will have had an opportunity to have a COVID-19 vaccine and an autumn booster programme will be offered for eligible groups to reduce GP consultations, unplanned hospital admission, pressures on emergency departments and outbreaks in nursing and residential homes. It is therefore a critical element of the system-wide approach for delivering robust and resilient health and care services during the winter. Following recommendations by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI),

the annual influenza immunisation programme continues to include all preschool children from 2 years old and all primary school children and young people up to and including Year 12 of secondary school. Extending the flu immunisation programme to healthy children aims to lower the impact of flu by providing direct protection to children and indirect protection to others. This will help to prevent cases of severe flu and flu-related deaths in older adults and people with clinical risk factors. Following JCVI recommendation in 2017, an adjuvanted inactivated vaccine will be used for those over 65 years of age. This vaccine provides better protection for the elderly. Vulnerable patients are also protected by the vaccination of health and social care workers. Uptake of flu vaccination in health and social care workers in Northern Ireland has improved in some Trusts but is still low compared to other parts of the UK and the Chief Medical Officer has again highlighted the importance of increasing uptake rates among health and social care workers.

What is flu?

Flu is a highly infectious, acute, viral infection of the respiratory tract. It is transmitted by the inhalation of infected droplets and aerosols and by hand-to-mouth/nose contamination from an infected surface. The incubation period is one to five days (average two to three days).

There are three different types of influenza virus:

- Influenza A causes epidemics and pandemics. This virus is found in many different animals and may spread between them. Birds, particularly wildfowl, are the main animal reservoir. The influenza A virus can live and multiply in wildfowl from where it can transmit to humans.
- Influenza B tends to cause less severe disease and smaller outbreaks. It is predominantly found in humans and the burden of disease is mostly in children.
- Influenza C causes minor respiratory illness only.

Who is affected by flu?

Flu can affect anyone, but it is more serious in babies, pregnant women, older people and those with certain underlying conditions.

What are the symptoms of flu?

In healthy individuals, flu is usually an unpleasant but self-limiting illness with recovery in five to seven days. Common symptoms include the sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, myalgia (muscle aches) and severe fatigue. Sufferers can also experience a dry cough, sore throat and stuffy nose. In young children, gastrointestinal symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhoea may be seen.

Possible complications of flu

Common complications may include bronchitis, otitis media (middle ear infection) in children and sinusitis. Other less common complications include secondary bacterial pneumonia, viral pneumonia, meningitis and encephalitis.

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This document gives advice and guidance for healthcare professionals on the 2025/26 seasonal influenza vaccination programme.

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