BOOST
YOUR IMMUNITY THIS WINTER

FLU vaccine
COVID-19 jab

Winter vaccines

Help protect yourself and your loved ones. Get the flu vaccine, COVID-19 booster, or both, if eligible.

HSC Public Health Agency

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Vaccines are our best protection this winter

Vaccines are the best protection we have against dangerous viruses like flu and COVID-19.

These viruses can cause hospitalisation and they can both be life-threatening. Studies show that for some people who catch both COVID-19 and flu at the same time, there is an increased risk of complications and even death.

Flu and COVID-19 viruses can spread easily, especially in winter when we are mainly spending time together indoors.

That's why it's really important to get the flu vaccine, COVID-19 booster, or both, if you are eligible. Getting the vaccines is the most effective way to boost your natural immunity and protect yourself and those people close to you this winter. By getting them, you will also be helping to protect our health service as it faces another challenging winter.

So if you are eligible for the flu vaccine, COVID-19 vaccine, or both, take up the offer and boost your immunity this winter.

Protect yourself against flu – it's more serious than you think

Flu is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus and circulates every year, usually in winter. Sometimes flu can lead to serious illnesses or make existing conditions worse.

Common symptoms of flu include:

- fever
- chills
- headache
- aching muscles
- cough
- sore throat

Because flu is a virus, like COVID-19, antibiotics won't help. People sometimes call a bad cold the flu, but for many it can be much more serious than that.

People with underlying health conditions are more likely to experience serious complications. In some cases flu can result in being admitted to intensive care or even death.

Each year the flu vaccine helps protect against the most common strains of flu likely to be circulating. Over time protection from the flu vaccine gradually decreases and flu strains can change, which means last flu season's vaccine may not protect you from this season's strain.

Cases of the flu virus were extremely low globally last flu season, mainly due to COVID-19 prevention measures, and as a result population immunity may be reduced this year. This means more flu could circulate. It is also possible that the flu season will begin earlier than usual.

With the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, it is expected that this winter will be the first when flu and COVID-19 will circulate fully at the same time.

The best way to protect yourself from catching and spreading flu is to get the free flu vaccine, if you are eligible. It's best to get it in the autumn before flu starts spreading. But you can get the vaccine later.

People who should get the flu vaccine

The flu vaccine is offered free to protect people at greater risk of serious illness and to reduce the amount of flu virus circulating. The following groups are being offered the vaccine:

- all children aged 2 up to and including age 16

- children aged 6 months to 2 years and adults aged 16 to 49 years with certain illnesses or health conditions

- pregnant women

- anyone aged 50 years or over

- anyone living in a residential or nursing home

- carers - if you care for another person, you should get the vaccine so you can continue caring for them

- close contacts of people with lowered immunity

- staff in independent care homes, hospices and domiciliary care providers

- health and social care workers

For more information about the flu vaccine and who is eligible, talk to your pharmacist or visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/winter-vaccines

COVID-19 booster – help protect yourself this winter

COVID-19 is a very infectious acute respiratory disease caused by a virus called coronavirus. Some people get infected and don't notice any symptoms at all. Most people will have mild symptoms and get better on their own, but for some people COVID-19 is serious or fatal.

The main symptoms of COVID-19 are:

- a high temperature

- a new, continuous cough

- a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste

If you have any of the main symptoms of COVID-19, even if they are mild, get a PCR test as soon as possible, stay at home and do not have visitors (self-isolate) until you get your test result.

Some people will experience more severe symptoms, sometimes these can be critical.

The chance of more serious symptoms is higher for older people and those with certain health conditions. The good news is research shows that vaccinations for COVID-19 are highly effective against severe illness and hospitalisation.

That's why vaccination against COVID-19 is so important. But even if you've had the primary vaccine course (for most people this will be two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine), like some other vaccines, protection may begin to decrease over time. The best way to continue to protect yourself is to get the COVID-19 booster if you are eligible.

The booster will help extend protection gained from your primary COVID-19 vaccine course, giving longer term protection. If you do get infected with COVID-19 this winter, the booster will reduce the risk of you becoming seriously ill and needing admission to hospital.

People who should get the COVID-19 booster

The COVID-19 booster vaccine is being offered to protect those people most at risk from COVID-19. It is being offered to:

- anyone living in a residential care home for older adults

- frontline health and social care staff

- anyone aged 40 years or over

- anyone aged 16 to 39 years with underlying health conditions that put them at higher risk of severe COVID-19

- adult carers

- adult household contacts of people with lowered immunity

If you fall into one of these groups, you'll be offered the booster around six months after your final dose of your primary COVID-19 vaccine course (for most people this will be the second dose).

For more information about the COVID-19 booster and who is eligible, talk to your pharmacist or visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/winter-vaccines

Stop the spread of both flu and COVID-19

Flu and COVID-19 are both highly contagious. Everyone can take actions to help stop these dangerous viruses spreading.

Things you can do to help stop the spread:

- Socialise outdoors or if you are indoors, make sure there is good ventilation.

- Try to keep your distance from others.

- Wear a face covering in public.

- Stay home and avoid contact with others when you are sick.*

- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the bin.

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.

- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces regularly.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use hand sanitiser.

*If displaying COVID-19 symptoms, take a PCR test as soon as possible and self-isolate until you get your test result.

Not yet got your COVID-19 vaccine?

If you have not had your primary COVID-19 vaccine course (for most people this will be two doses), you should get your vaccine as soon as possible. It's the best way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19. If you are eligible for the booster, you will still need it, but the timing will depend on when you had your primary COVID-19 vaccine course.

Find out where to get the COVID-19 vaccine at www.nidirect.gov.uk/covidvaccine

Getting your winter vaccines

Vaccines are the best protection we have against dangerous viruses like flu and COVID-19. Everyone aged 16 and over who is eligible for either the flu vaccine, COVID-19 booster vaccine, or both, should make themselves aware of their own GP surgery's or community pharmacist's vaccination arrangements.

All pre-school children aged two years and over will be offered the flu vaccine in their GP surgery. Children at primary school and those in Years 8 to 12 in secondary school will be offered it in school.

Children aged 16 and 17 years with underlying health conditions will be offered one or both vaccines in their GP surgery.

For more information on winter vaccines and who is eligible, talk to your pharmacist or visit **www.nidirect.gov.uk/winter-vaccines**