

What is seasonal flu?

Seasonal flu is an annual event that is expected during the winter months.

The flu vaccination in Northern Ireland offers protection against the main seasonal flu strains that were circulating during last year's Southern Hemisphere winter, and information to date shows a good match between the vaccine and the strains which are currently circulating.

Therefore, it is **essential that everyone who is eligible for vaccination takes up the opportunity**. This is also why you need to be vaccinated annually, to ensure you have the most comprehensive protection.

What is 'Australian flu'?

The A (H3N2) flu strain has been referred to in the media as 'Australian/Aussie flu'. A (H3N2) and the other flu strains currently circulating are seasonal flu viruses that have occurred in previous years during the winter months in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres.

Last year (2017), seasonal flu activity in Australia was the highest seen since 2009 (the pandemic year). More people had flu, with more attending primary care and requiring hospitalisation than in previous years. Flu can be serious every year, but in Australia, while flu prevalence increased, there were no more serious complications of flu seen than in previous years.

The most common flu virus that was circulating in Australia was the A (H3N2) strain, although other seasonal flu strains were also circulating (influenza B and A (H1N1)).

The A (H3N2) strain was the predominant strain in last year's flu season in Northern Ireland and across the UK and Ireland. In Northern Ireland last year we had a mild flu season. This is because Northern Ireland has a more comprehensive flu vaccination programme than Australia. Historically Northern Ireland has also always had high vaccination uptake and so it is likely that reduced levels of flu were circulating here compared with Australia.

The flu vaccination in Northern Ireland offers protection against the three seasonal flu strains (A (H3N2), A (H1N1) and B) that were circulating during last year's Southern Hemisphere winter. Information from the Public Health England (PHE) Respiratory Virus Unit shows that to date (up to 28 December 2017) the virus strains currently circulating match the strains included in the 2017/18 Northern Hemisphere vaccine.

How is flu activity monitored in Northern Ireland?

Seasonal flu activity in Northern Ireland is monitored throughout the year to inform public health action and to prevent spread of the infection. Data is collected from GP consultations for flu-like illness, giving an indication of community activity.

When the consultations reach the threshold line the flu season has formally started. The threshold line is called Moving Epidemic Method (MEM) and this year (2017/18) it is set at 22.58 per 100,000 population.

Once flu activity has crossed the line it is then classed as low, medium, high and very high. During the H1N1 (swine flu) epidemic in 2010/11, flu activity was classed as very high.

In recent years the flu activity has not even crossed the line. This season, up to 7 January 2018, the number of GP consultations has increased and has crossed the threshold line but is within the range for a medium flu activity season.

How bad is the flu situation currently in Northern Ireland?

Seasonal flu is an annual event of varying severity which Health and Social Care plans for each year.

In the past few weeks there has been an increase in flu activity in Northern Ireland. This increase is anticipated, but has occurred a couple of weeks earlier than last year. Activity here is similar to the rest of the UK, Ireland and the other Northern Hemisphere countries.

As of the 7 January 2018, the number of GP consultations for flu-like illness has increased. However, the season is defined as having medium flu activity to date.

The number of detections of influenza viruses has also increased, with both influenza types A (H3N2) and B strains of the virus predominating. There has also been an increase in the number of flu detections on laboratory samples in people in hospital.

Flu can be a serious disease every year. However, to date, the current flu viruses circulating are not causing more serious disease than in previous years. Up to 7 January, there have been 31 cases of flu requiring admission to the intensive care unit, which is similar to the same time last year, and a total of four deaths in ICU with confirmed influenza. No excess mortality has been observed.

While it is difficult to predict the course of flu seasons and the likely severity, our comprehensive flu programme, good levels of vaccine uptake and more extensive vaccination programme for children mean levels of immunity in the population in Northern Ireland should be higher than elsewhere.

Why is it important to get the flu vaccine?

Northern Ireland benefits from a more comprehensive flu vaccination programme than England, the Republic of Ireland or Australia. Historically we have also had good vaccine uptake across eligible groups. This can offer better protection for individuals and the community against flu.

However, it is important that the public does not become complacent and miss getting their vaccine if they are eligible. High uptake of the vaccine is required to help protect individuals and those in the community that are more vulnerable to the serious complications of flu. You should have your flu vaccine at the earliest opportunity and it is not too late to have it now.

Who is eligible for the free flu vaccine?

Those eligible for the vaccine include:

- all individuals over 65 years of age;
- people under 65 years that have pre-existing long-term clinical conditions;
- pregnant women at any stage;
- pre-school children (aged two to four years);
- primary school children (aged four to eleven years);
- healthcare workers;
- individuals living in care homes, carers and household contacts of individuals that are immunosuppressed.

Is it too late to get the flu vaccine?

No. If you or someone in your care is eligible for vaccination, contact your GP to make an appointment. It takes approximately two weeks following vaccination to develop maximum protection against flu. As flu levels have been increasing it is important to get vaccinated immediately.

What are the symptoms of flu?

The symptoms of flu include:

- fever (typically 38–40°C) – this tends to be more severe in children;
- fatigue/unusual tiredness;
- headache;
- runny nose;
- sore throat;
- shortness of breath or a cough;
- loss of appetite;
- aching muscles;
- vomiting or diarrhoea;
- sensitivity to light;
- insomnia;
- dry, unproductive cough.

Flu symptoms usually peak after two or three days and you should begin to feel much better within five to eight days. However, **older people or those with certain medical conditions may develop complications that can lead to serious illness and can be life-threatening.**

What do I do if I get flu?

It is important to remember that for most people, flu can be treated at home with rest, drinking plenty of fluids and taking medicine such as paracetamol, as directed, to control the symptoms.

If you have a high temperature and breathing difficulties, if your symptoms are getting worse over time or you haven't improved after a week, you should contact your GP or the GP out-of-hours service. **You should not attend an Emergency Department unless it is urgent and essential.**

Is flu the reason our Emergency Departments are so busy?

No. Our health service is under considerable pressure for lots of reasons.

However, flu activity can be difficult to predict and therefore there is always the potential for flu to have an impact on Emergency Departments if more people acquire the virus.

The best way we can protect ourselves and others from getting flu and its serious complications is by ensuring that all eligible people get the flu vaccination to help protect themselves and those around them, and reduce circulation of the virus in the community.

If I'm not eligible for the flu vaccine, what can I do?

You can take simple steps to reduce the spread of the flu virus. Remember, you should always:

- carry tissues;
- use tissues to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze;
- dispose of the dirty tissues quickly;
- wash your hands regularly;
- clean hard surfaces (such as door handles) frequently using your usual cleaning product.

For more information about the flu vaccine visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/stay-well or www.pha.site/Fluleaflets