

Leading UK health charities join forces to boost vaccine uptake

- Cancer Research UK and Diabetes UK among those providing information and reassurance to their members through their trusted networks
- Move comes as UK hits 16 million top-up jabs in total
- Data shows immunity to virus weakens after six months, as people urged to get top-ups ahead of winter

Some of the UK's leading health charities including the British Heart Foundation, Diabetes UK and Cancer Research UK are joining forces with the government and the NHS to encourage vulnerable people to get their COVID-19 vaccines.

The coalition brings together 16 charities who will work to encourage their members to get their first, second and booster doses as soon as they can, as well as their third primary course dose if they're immunocompromised. The organisations will encourage people to get their flu vaccines, to keep them as safe as possible this winter. Terrence Higgins Trust, Carers UK and Epilepsy Action have also taken part in a short film that will be shared over social media.

As the weather turns colder and people are spending more time indoors mixing with family and friends, it's crucial that those who are vulnerable to severe illness from COVID-19 and flu come forward for the jabs they need.

People aged 40 and over, health and social care workers or those aged 16 and over with an underlying health condition that puts them at greater risk of severe COVID-19 illness are now eligible for booster vaccinations, provided it's been six months since their second dose.

The organisations will be using their extensive networks to provide information and reassurance to vulnerable people about the safety and effectiveness of the vaccines, including on their social channels.

The intervention comes as the UK hits its next milestone in the vaccine rollout with just over 16 million boosters and third doses administered in total.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

I am hugely grateful to all the charities who are backing our vaccine campaign and supporting some of the most vulnerable in our society.

With winter approaching it's so important that those who are at risk from the virus are protected in order to keep themselves safe.

The vaccines are safe and effective and are helping us build a wall

of defence against COVID-19. Please come forward for yours as soon as you can.

The charities taking part in the coalition include:

- African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust;
- Anthony Nolan;
- British Heart Foundation;
- British Liver Trust;
- Cancer Research UK;
- Carers UK;
- Diabetes UK;
- Epilepsy Action;
- Epilepsy Society;
- Kidney Care UK;
- Kidney Research UK;
- Macmillan;
- Parkinson's UK;
- Rethink Mental Illness;
- Sickle Cell Society; and
- Terrence Higgins Trust.

A total of 16,004,629 million people in the UK have already received their booster vaccines and third doses, securing crucial protection ahead of the winter.

More than 50.8 million first doses (88.4%) and 46.2 million second doses (80.4%) have been given across the UK.

Vaccines Minister Maggie Throup said:

This partnership with health charities is vital to allow us to reach the groups most in need of a COVID-19 vaccine to keep them safe from the virus.

The fight against COVID-19 through the vaccines is a national mission and it's brilliant to see so many different organisations step up to help get this message to those most at-risk.

If you're yet to get your first, second or booster dose, please do come forward for the jab as soon as possible.

This week, the National Booking Service opened to people aged 40-49 for their booster jab, as well as young people aged 16-17 who aren't clinically at risk for their second jab.

This means people who have had their booster vaccine by 11 December will have very high protection against COVID-19 by Christmas Day. Following a rise in cases and a return of lockdown restrictions in Europe, those eligible for a booster have been urged to take up the offer as soon as possible to protect

themselves, their families and help to reduce the pressure on the NHS.

Third doses are also being offered to people over 12 who were severely immunosuppressed at the time of their first or second dose, including those with leukaemia, advanced HIV and organ transplants. These people may not mount a full response to vaccination and therefore may be less protected than the wider population.

Nikki Joule, Policy Manager at Diabetes UK, said:

People living with diabetes have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and have a higher risk of becoming seriously ill if they develop COVID-19.

It is clear that the pandemic is still posing a very real threat, so it's incredibly important that people with diabetes stay well and stay out of hospital.

Our advice is simple: if you are living with diabetes, then you should take up the offer of a COVID-19 booster vaccine when contacted. The coronavirus vaccines are safe and are saving lives.

Helen Walker, Chief Executive of Carers UK said:

Unpaid carers continue to carefully manage the risk of the virus to themselves and to their older and disabled relatives which can often be hard work. From our contact with carers, we know that getting the vaccine has not only increased their immunity, it has also brought a sense of relief and decreased stress.

As we head towards Christmas, we know that this can be a busy time, particularly if you're providing unpaid care to an ill or disabled relative or friend. We encourage any unpaid carers who haven't yet had their boosters to come forward and get one as soon as they can, to further protect themselves and their loved ones.

Daniel Jennings, senior policy & campaigns officer, at Epilepsy Action said:

COVID-19 continues to have a significant impact on all our lives and it's important we continue to protect ourselves – and others – from coronavirus. We are joining forces with other charities to urge people in priority group 6, including those with epilepsy, to get the COVID booster vaccine this winter.

Studies have shown that people with epilepsy could have a slightly increased risk of being admitted to hospital or dying from coronavirus. A key part of beating the virus and keeping people safe is through vaccinations.

This is why it's so important that people with epilepsy who have already been vaccinated get the booster to help give them the best possible protection throughout the winter and beyond.

It's important to remember that the vaccines that have been approved for use in the UK have met the strict safety standards set by the medicines regulator. They have also been deemed safe for people with neurological conditions including epilepsy by the Association of British Neurologists.

Fiona Loud, Policy Director of Kidney Care UK, said:

Vaccines have allowed us all to come so far in such a short time, and going into the winter months it is vital that everyone has as much protection as possible from COVID-19 and flu as they can put you at a much higher risk of complications.

We are part of this coalition because it is so important that the thousands of kidney patients we support know how they can access these life-saving vaccines. We encourage people with kidney disease, who are on dialysis and those who have had a kidney transplant to take up the offer of their booster or third primary doses as well as their flu vaccine.

Ultimately we all want to be able to spend time with our loved ones this Christmas, and the best way for us to do this is to all play our part and look out for ourselves and for each other.

Director of Communications and Policy of the British Liver Trust Vanessa Hebditch said:

Liver disease patients are among the highest risk groups when it comes to COVID-19 and the vaccine is the best form of protection for them against the virus.

We welcome the rollout of the winter vaccine programme to prolong the protection and reduce the risk of serious disease among the most vulnerable during these cold months.

If you're invited for a booster or third COVID-19 vaccine, please don't delay. It's the quickest and easiest way to keep you and your loved ones healthy this winter.

Vaccines give high levels of protection but immunity reduces over time, particularly for older adults and at-risk groups, so it is vital that vulnerable people come forward to get their COVID-19 booster vaccine to top up their defences and protect themselves this winter.

The latest evidence from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) shows that protection against symptomatic disease falls from 65%, up to three months after the second dose, to 45% six months after the second dose for the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, and from 90% to 65% for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Protection against hospitalisation falls from 95% to 75% for Oxford/AstraZeneca and 99% to 90% for Pfizer/BioNTech.

Although the vaccine effectiveness against severe disease remains high, a small change can generate a major shift in hospital admissions. For example, a change from 95% to 90% protection against hospitalisation would lead to doubling of admissions in those vaccinated.

The offer of a first and second COVID-19 vaccine remains open to anyone who is eligible. Vaccines are available free of charge and from thousands of vaccine centres, GP practices and pharmacies. Around 98% of people live within 10 miles of a vaccination centre in England and vaccinations are taking place at sites including mosques, community centres and football stadiums.

Vaccines are also available for those aged 12 to 15 to offer the best possible protection this winter in schools, as well as more than 200 vaccine centres.

Notes to Editors:

- People can book by calling 119 or get vaccinated at hundreds of walk-in sites across the country six months after their second dose without an appointment. Those eligible can use the NHS online walk-in finder to locate the most convenient site.
- Vaccine confidence is high, with data from the Office for National Statistics showing nearly all (94%) of those aged 50 to 69 say they would be likely to get their COVID-19 booster if offered, with the figure rising to 98% for those over 70.
- Flu is another winter virus that can be serious. To give people the best protection over winter, those eligible for a free flu vaccine should come forward and book an appointment at either their GP practice or their local pharmacy, or take it up when offered by their employer or other healthcare provider.
- The government has launched a nationwide advertising campaign, encouraging people eligible to get their booster and flu jabs to protect themselves and their loved ones and help reduce pressures on the NHS. This includes outdoor billboards, broadcast and community radio and TV.
- There are more than 500 extra vaccination sites now compared to April this year, with 1,697 vaccination centres in operation in April 2021,

and over 2,200 vaccination centres in operation now.

- For questions around the COVID-19 booster vaccine and diabetes, please contact the Diabetes UK helpline on 0345 123 2399, Monday-Friday from 9am-6pm, or you can find more information on diabetes and coronavirus at diabetes.org.uk.