

PHE and NHS England urge eligible people to get free flu vaccine

Parents of 2 and 3-year olds are urged to protect their children against flu, which can be a serious and fatal illness.

Those aged 65 and over, children and adults with underlying medical conditions and pregnant women are also urged to get their free vaccine in the next few weeks, before flu begins to circulate widely.

The primary schools-based flu vaccination programme is once again underway. This follows a temporary pause in the ordering of the nasal vaccine, which was caused by delays from the manufacturer.

Primary school clinics will be rescheduled as soon as possible and children in high risk groups should visit their GP if their school session has been delayed, to ensure that they are protected early. GPs have now been advised to call in all eligible children for vaccination by early December.

Dr Mary Ramsay, Head of Immunisation at Public Health England (PHE), said:

The flu vaccine is the best defence we have against what can be a serious and fatal illness, and flu season is just around the corner. If you are in an eligible group, visit your GP or pharmacist as soon possible to ensure you are protected.

Professor Stephen Powis, NHS England (NHSE) national medical director, said:

Flu can be extremely serious and even kill in some cases and getting vaccinated is the best protection against it.

NHS services across England continue to work hard to prepare for the winter season, including staff getting their free flu jab, and now we're appealing to the public to 'Help Us, Help You' by ensuring that they and their eligible children or relatives get vaccinated, now.

Professor Martin Marshall, Chair of the Royal College of GPs, said:

Influenza can be a very unpleasant illness, and while it is not generally a serious illness for most people, for those in at-risk groups, such as young children, elderly people, those with long-term conditions and pregnant women, flu has the potential to trigger life-threatening complications.

The best defence against the flu is to be vaccinated and we

strongly urge all patients in at-risk groups to get vaccinated and for parents to ensure their young children receive their vaccine as soon as possible.

PHE is working closely with NHSE, NHS Improvement (NHSI) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to ensure that all eligible children receive their flu vaccination as soon as possible.

The adult flu programme has continued as normal and PHE is reminding all those aged 65 and over, pregnant women and all children and adults with underlying medical conditions to visit their GP or pharmacist to get their flu vaccine.

The nasal spray, Fluenz Tetra™ (Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine), cannot be stockpiled in advance because the components of the vaccine change every year and it has a very short shelf life.

The delay related to Fluenz Tetra vaccine stocks that were due to arrive in November, was due to an issue detected during routine product release processes. Some of these tests did not run correctly and were repeated before the vaccine was released by AstraZeneca and then the independent regulator. The issue is not due to safety or the efficacy of the vaccine itself, which has passed all the other tests. No other batches of the vaccine, including those already in use by schools and GPs, have been affected.

PHE, NHSE and NHSI are prioritising vulnerable children. If locally, a school or GP is unable to offer Fluenz Tetra to a high-risk child, they should receive the injected vaccine instead, to avoid delay in being protected.

The majority of children will receive the nasal spray vaccine in school. This season, all primary school aged children are eligible. Children aged 2 and 3 (on 31 August 2019) and those in clinical risk groups may receive the vaccine through their GP.

Children and young people who are eligible for a flu vaccine include those aged 2 and 3 years, children of primary school age, carers, those who are pregnant and those in a clinical risk groups including those with:

- chronic neurological disease
- chronic respiratory disease
- chronic heart disease
- chronic kidney disease
- chronic liver disease
- diabetes
- immunosuppression
- asplenia or dysfunction of the spleen

Adults aged 65 years old and over are more vulnerable and may suffer more than most people if they catch flu.

There is strong evidence that pregnant women have a much higher risk of serious illness as a result of flu, compared with the general population. The

risks are highest in the last 3 months of pregnancy. Vaccination against flu reduces these risks. Serious complications of flu include pneumonia, septic shock (a severe and life-threatening infection of the whole body), meningitis and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

It is also important children are vaccinated as they tend to be 'super-spreaders' of flu so if they get it, they are likely to infect more vulnerable older family members. The flu vaccine will help protect children from flu and also reduces the chance of them spreading flu to others.

*[DHSC[: Department of Health and Social Care