

What is Influenza (flu)?

Flu is a highly infectious illness that spreads rapidly through the coughs and sneezes of people who are carrying the virus. Infections from Flu viruses usually happen between October and March.

Colds and flu share some of the same symptoms (cough, sore throat), but are caused by different viruses. Flu can be much more serious than a cold.

Flu usually starts much more quickly than a cold, and symptoms include a sudden fever of 38-40C (100-104F), muscle aches and pains, sweating, headaches, feeling exhausted and needing to lie down, a dry, chesty cough, and there may also be a runny nose and sneezing.

The severity of flu varies from person to person and although healthy individuals will usually be better within the week, other people in at risk groups may have a more serious infection, which can cause admission to hospital, ongoing problems or even death. Because flu is caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics won't treat it.

How can Flu be prevented?

Cold and flu viruses are spread by droplets that are coughed or sneezed out by an infected person. Other people can breathe in these droplets or transfer the droplets to their eyes or nose, via their fingers. The viruses can also be passed on via infected droplets on objects or surfaces, such as door handles.

You can help to prevent passing on or getting colds and flu by washing your hands regularly, and avoiding touching your eyes and nose. If you are coughing or sneezing use a tissue and throw the used tissue away, washing your hands as soon as possible afterwards.

The best way to avoid catching and spreading flu is by having the vaccination before the flu season starts.

NHS funded Flu vaccine

Most Pharmacists are able to offer an NHS flu vaccination service if you have a long-term health condition, even one which is well managed, as catching flu could make you seriously ill and make complications like pneumonia more likely. Those who are at 'high risk' and are vulnerable to complications from an infection with flu can include anyone aged 65 and over, pregnant women, adults and children with an underlying health condition (particularly long-term heart or respiratory disease), children and adults with weakened immune systems and some people caring or working with vulnerable people.

Is the Flu vaccine effective?

Flu vaccines protect against the main three or four types of flu virus most likely to be circulating and are the best protection we have against an unpredictable virus. It won't stop all flu viruses and it's not possible to predict fully the strains that will circulate each year, as there is always a risk of a change in the virus. The most likely viruses that will cause flu each year are identified in advance of the flu season in the UK and vaccines are then made to match them as closely as possible, which is why people are advised to have the flu vaccine every year.

The level of protection may vary between people, so it's not a 100% guarantee that you'll be flu-free. Some people still get flu after vaccination, although it is usually milder. It takes about 14 days for the vaccine to take effect.

What are the side effects from the vaccine?

The injectable flu vaccine does not contain any live viruses, so it cannot cause flu. You may get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, and your arm may feel a bit sore where you had the injection. Other reactions are rare, and flu vaccines are very safe.

If you have a sore arm after the vaccination, try to continue to move your arm regularly to ease the pain, don't let it get stiff and sore. Taking a painkiller, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen usually helps.

Who can have the Flu vaccine?

Vaccination is offered from September to March to provide protection through the winter and spring. If you think you can have a flu vaccination through the NHS, check with your Pharmacist who will be able to advise you where you can be vaccinated for free.

For those people who aren't eligible for a flu vaccine on the NHS you can pay for a flu vaccination privately at this pharmacy.

To check that the flu vaccine is suitable for you, your Pharmacist will ask you to complete a questionnaire to check your medical history and whether you have any allergies. Occasionally some people may not be suitable to have the vaccine at the pharmacy and you may be advised to see your GP or Practice Nurse.

Further information on Flu vaccination:

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaccinations/pages/flu-influenza-vaccine.aspx>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/flu-vaccination-who-should-have-it-this-winter-and-why>