

Immunising preschool children against flu

Information for practitioners working in early years settings, including childminders



This information is about the annual flu vaccination programme for preschool children. It is for those working in the early years sector to inform them about the programme and how they can support it. It is for nursery and preschool managers and staff, and childminders delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework and those who provide informal childcare.

Background to the programme

Flu is a common infection in babies and children and can be very unpleasant for them. Children under the age of 5 have the highest hospital admission rates for flu compared to other age groups. When flu comes round this autumn/winter more young children are likely to catch it than usual. This is because the COVID-19 restrictions also stopped flu and young children in particular won't have natural immunity from catching flu before.

All children aged 2 and 3 years old (on 31 August before flu vaccinations start in the autumn) are eligible for a free flu vaccination in the form of a nasal spray. This is usually given at the GP practice. However, not all parents are aware of this or take up the offer. Not only does the flu vaccine help to protect the children themselves, but by reducing the spread of flu it will also help protect family members, and others in the local community.

What is flu?

Flu in children can cause fever, stuffy nose, dry cough, sore throat, aching muscles and joints, and extreme tiredness. This can often last several days. Some children can get a very high fever, sometimes without the usual flu symptoms, and may need to go to hospital for treatment. Serious complications of flu include a painful ear infection, acute bronchitis, and pneumonia.

Flu is different from the common cold. It is caused by a different group of viruses and the symptoms tend to start more suddenly, be more severe and last longer.

What is the purpose of the programme?

Flu vaccine is offered to those who are most at risk of severe illness from flu. This includes pregnant women, older people, and those with long term health conditions (including children with long term health conditions).

In addition, annual vaccination of children helps provide protection to each child and reduces the spread of flu to their families and the wider community, protecting others who are at increased risk of becoming seriously ill from flu. Preventing flu infections is also important when COVID-19 might be circulating, as having both infections at the same time can be more severe.

Where can children get the vaccine?

All children who are aged 2 and 3 years old (provided they were this age on 31 August before flu vaccinations start in the autumn) can get the vaccine at their general practice. This is usually administered by the practice nurse and for most children is a quick and painless nasal spray.

There are some children for whom the nasal spray is not suitable. GP practices will check suitability before offering the vaccine.



When do the vaccinations need to be given?

To be effective, vaccinations need to be given in the autumn or early winter before flu typically starts to circulate. Flu viruses can change year on year. Consequently, vaccines are made each year to provide protection against the flu viruses that are predicted to circulate, and therefore the vaccine needs to be given on an annual basis.

Can parents refuse to have their child vaccinated?

Yes. The vaccination is not mandatory. Parents will need to give their informed consent for the vaccination. The nasal flu vaccine contains a highly processed form of gelatine (derived from pigs). For those who may not accept the use of porcine gelatine in medical products, an alternative injectable vaccine is available. Parents should discuss their options with their nurse or doctor.

The role of the Early Years Sector

What can staff in the early years sector do to support the programme?

Staff working in the early years sector can help raise awareness of the programme amongst parents. Resources can be downloaded or ordered for free.

As well as protecting children and the wider community, promoting the flu vaccine promotes a healthy working environment in nurseries and childcare settings by reducing the risk of spread of flu to others including staff.

Can staff have the vaccine?

Not as part of this programme. The nasal flu vaccine used in this programme is not licensed for adults. Some early years providers, however, may choose to provide an injectable vaccine for their staff through their own occupational health services.

Staff with certain medical conditions that put them more at risk of flu, or who are pregnant, are entitled to free flu vaccination (injectable vaccine) through the NHS. Eligible staff should contact their GP practice. Some local pharmacies also provide this service.

For more information see www.nhs.uk/flujab



Resources

UKHSA has produced the following resources which can be downloaded or ordered for free from www.gov.uk/government/publications/flu-vaccination-leaflets-and-posters



Protecting your child against flu leaflet

This provides information for parents and carers on the flu vaccine, including how it works and contraindications.

Five reasons to vaccinate your child against flu poster

This sets out key messages for parents about the flu vaccine.

- 1. Protect your child**
The vaccine will help protect your child against flu and serious complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia
- 2. Protect you, your family and friends**
Vaccinating your child will help protect more vulnerable friends and family
- 3. No injection needed**
The nasal spray is painless and easy to have
- 4. It's better than having flu**
The nasal spray helps protect against flu, has been given to millions of children worldwide and has an excellent safety record
- 5. Avoid costs**
If your child gets flu, you may have to take time off work or arrange alternative childcare

For more information visit www.nhs.uk/child-flu

Flu Immunisation
Helping to protect children, every winter

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Other children who are offered flu vaccination

What about children with long-term health conditions?

Children with certain health conditions, even if well managed, are at higher risk of severe complications if they get flu. It is especially important that these children are vaccinated.

This includes children with serious breathing problems (such as some children with asthma), serious heart conditions, severe kidney or liver disease, diabetes, immunosuppression or problems with the spleen. These children should have a flu vaccination every year from the age of 6 months onwards. Most will have the nasal spray vaccine but it is not recommended for children under the age of 2 years who will be offered an injected vaccine instead.

What about school aged children?

Many school aged children will also be offered the flu vaccine with sessions taking place in the school. Further information is available on the NHS website.

Visit www.nhs.uk/child-flu for more information.

What should we do if a child or staff member has flu symptoms?

There is no precise exclusion period. Children and adults with symptoms of flu are advised to remain at home until they have recovered.

There is more advice at www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-protection-in-schools-and-other-childcare-facilities



Preventing the spread of flu

You can help stop yourself catching flu or spreading it to others with good hygiene measures. The young children that you care for should also be encouraged to do the same:

- wash hands regularly with soap and warm water
- use tissues to cover the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- put used tissues in a bin as soon as possible

Regularly cleaning surfaces such as tables, telephone and door handles can also help to get rid of germs.



www.nhs.uk/vaccinations