

Flu jab →

Protecting children at
increased risk from flu

 mmunisation

the safest way to protect your child's health for life



Why is my child being offered flu vaccine?

If your child is already suffering from another illness then catching flu can be serious. Your child may not be able to fight off flu as effectively as other children. It could also make their existing condition worse.

These conditions include:

- serious breathing problems, for example, severe asthma needing regular inhaled or oral steroids;
- serious heart conditions;
- severe kidney or liver disease;
- diabetes;
- immunosuppression due to disease or treatment, for example, chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment for cancer or long-term steroid use; and
- problems with the spleen, either because the spleen has been removed (asplenia) or doesn't work properly, for example, sickle cell disease.

If you are not sure whether your child needs a flu vaccination or need more advice, speak to your practice nurse, GP or health visitor.

What is flu?

Flu is an illness caused by influenza viruses. It is most common during the winter months. People often describe colds as flu, but the symptoms of flu come on very suddenly. Flu is different from and more severe than a cold.

Flu symptoms are:

- a high fever;
- a shivery feeling;
- a headache;
- an aching body; and
- extreme tiredness.

A dry cough, sore throat and stuffy nose are also common with flu.

How is flu spread?

Flu is highly infectious. It spreads very quickly by coughs, sneezes and touching people who are already carrying the virus. Touching objects such as toys that have been coughed or sneezed on can also pass it on to other people.



How will flu affect my child?

Flu lasts for about a week, during which time your child will be off their food, may feel very unwell and want to stay in bed. Even after the infection has gone, it may take much longer for your child to fully recover. Flu can also be followed by other infections, such as pneumonia, bronchitis, ear infections (otitis media) and sinusitis.

What is the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine protects against those types of flu virus that your child is most likely to come across each winter. Different flu viruses are around each winter, so a new vaccine has to be produced each year. The vaccine protects against flu but not against other respiratory infections such as the common cold.

Can the flu vaccine cause flu?

As the vaccine viruses are inactivated (killed), they cannot cause flu.



When should my child have the flu vaccine?

Children can have the flu vaccine from six months of age. The best time to have the vaccine is between September and early November so that your child is protected before flu starts circulating. If your child is under 13 years of age and is having the flu vaccine for the first time, they will need two doses about one month apart in order to be fully protected.

How effective is the vaccine?

The vaccine normally gives good protection. However, in some cases a child's existing illness may reduce its effectiveness. It should still help to make the flu less serious though.

Will my child have to have flu vaccine every year?

Yes. The viruses that cause flu change every year, which means the flu vaccine has to change as well. So, your child will need to be immunised each year before the new flu viruses start circulating in the winter.

How soon does the vaccine start to work and how long will protection last?

The flu vaccine may take up to 10 to 14 days to reach full protection. Protection lasts for about one year.

Are there any side effects from the vaccine?

Your child may get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days following immunisation as their immune system responds to the vaccine. Their arm may be a bit sore for a day or two where the injection was given.

Can children who are allergic to eggs have the flu vaccine?


Flu vaccines are prepared in hens' eggs so they should not be given to anyone with a known anaphylactic hypersensitivity (a severe allergic reaction that requires urgent medical attention) to egg products. Ask your doctor if you are not sure.



Are there any other reasons why my child shouldn't have flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine should not be given to people who have had an anaphylactic reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine or any part of the vaccine (including neomycin, kanamycin and gentamicin – antibiotics which may be present in tiny amounts).

As with other immunisations, the injection should be delayed if your child has a high fever and should be given when they have recovered. This is to avoid the fever being associated with the vaccine, or the vaccine increasing the fever your child already has. However, if your child has a minor illness without a fever, such as a cold, they should have their immunisation as normal.



Does the flu vaccine contain thiomersal (mercury)?

Some of the flu vaccines contain thiomersal, which is used as a preservative. If you want more information about thiomersal in vaccines, speak to your practice nurse, health visitor or GP, or visit www.immunisation.nhs.uk for a factsheet.

Does it matter which flu vaccine my child receives?

The thiomersal-free flu vaccines are as safe and effective as those containing thiomersal. If possible, a thiomersal-free flu vaccine is advised but if this is not available, a vaccine containing thiomersal should be given.

Can the flu vaccine be given at the same time as other vaccines?

Yes, the flu vaccine can be given at the same time as the routine childhood vaccines and at the same time as pneumococcal vaccine. It should be given at a separate site, preferably in a different limb.



What should I do if my child gets flu?

You should make sure that your child rests and drinks plenty of fluids. You can give them paracetamol liquid or ibuprofen liquid to treat a fever and pain, but be sure to check the dosage instructions on the packaging.

Never give aspirin to children under 16 years old.

If:

- you are worried about your child;
- the flu symptoms are severe; or
- you think that the flu is making your child's existing condition worse;

Speak to your doctor or call NHS direct on 0845 46 47.

If you can't contact your doctor, follow your instincts and go to your nearest hospital emergency department.

Flu is a virus, so antibiotics will not work unless the flu has led to a bacterial illness that needs treatment.



Other immunisations your child may need

Check with your GP, practice nurse or health visitor about other immunisations. Your child may be recommended a pneumococcal (pneumo) vaccine as well as the routine childhood immunisations.

NHS Immunisation Information
Department of Health Publications
PO Box 777
London
SE1 6XH
Phone: 08701 555 455
E-mail: dh@prolog.uk.com
Textphone (for minicom users): 08700 102 870
for the hard of hearing (8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday)

For more information on
immunisation, visit our website
at www.immunisation.nhs.uk



Immunisation Information