

The Flu Vaccine

Myth busting Factsheet



**Bedfordshire, Luton
and Milton Keynes**
Clinical Commissioning Groups

Flu – The Facts

- Influenza is a virus that kills thousands of people every year and is particularly serious for the older person, the very young and those with underlying medical conditions. It kills otherwise healthy adults and children too.
- On Average over 11,000 people die of flu each year.
- Influenza IS NOT A BAD COLD. Flu symptoms include fever, chills, aching muscles plus cough and sore throat. You are likely to spend a few days in bed. Flu is a serious and debilitating virus.
- The Flu vaccine is safe. It is given to millions of people across the UK every year. Some people will experience mild side effects, but this is much less disruptive than catching the flu.
- Have the vaccine even if you think you have had the flu – there are three or four strains in each vaccine and you will only be protected against the one type you have had and not others circulating.

Benefits of the flu vaccine

- Reduction in deaths due to Influenza related pneumonia.
- The vaccine will help reduce risk of illness due to pneumonia and other complications in those who are vaccinated and in vulnerable people including those with chronic diseases.
- People with long term conditions have low immunity to infections; flu vaccinations will reduce the chance of getting infections and reduces the complications of flu related illness.

Flu and its Complications

The flu virus is predominantly spread through droplets of saliva released when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread through direct contact with someone with flu (touch) and indirect contact (when droplets settle on worktops, objects, upholstery).

The flu virus can be spread easily and rapidly by both symptomatic people (showing symptoms) and asymptomatic people (not yet showing symptoms) who are still carrying the virus.

Seasonal flu can worsen and lead to:

- Bacterial chest infection (pneumonia); which occasionally can become life threatening;
- Other uncommon complications include infection in the brain and spinal cord (meningitis);
- Infection of the blood that causes a severe drop in blood pressure (septic shock);
- Infected tonsils (Tonsillitis);
- Ear infection (Otitis media);
- Inflammation of the brain (Encephalitis)
- In pregnancy, it can affect the growth of the unborn baby, cause preterm labour and increase the risk of miscarriage or stillbirth.

Common Myths

The Seasonal flu vaccine gives you the flu.

FALSE

No, it doesn't. It is impossible to get the flu from having the flu jab. The injected flu vaccine that is given to adults contains "dead" flu viruses which cannot pass on the virus. Your arm may feel a bit sore where you were injected, and some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a day or two, but other reactions are very rare. The children's flu nasal spray vaccine contains live but weakened flu viruses that will not give your child flu, however it may have similar symptoms.

Flu can be treated with antibiotics.

FALSE

Flu is a virus not a bacterial infection so cannot be treated with Antibiotics. However, a bacterial infection may occur as a complication of flu and then you would need antibiotics.

Pregnant women cannot have the vaccine because it is live.

FALSE

The adult flu vaccine is not live. You should have the vaccine whatever stage of pregnancy you are in. If you're pregnant, you could become very ill if you get flu, which could also be dangerous for your baby. Having the jab can also protect your baby against flu after they're born and during the early months of life as babies cannot be vaccinated.

Having the flu is just like having a heavy cold.

FALSE

A bad bout of flu is much worse than a heavy cold. Flu symptoms come on suddenly and sometimes severely. If you get complications caused by flu, you could become seriously ill (e.g. meningitis, septicaemia) and have to go to hospital, this can occur whether you suffer with a chronic condition or not.

Once you have a flu jab you are protected for life.

FALSE

No, not true. The viruses that cause flu can change every year, so you need a vaccination each year that matches the new viruses. The vaccine usually provides protection for the duration of the flu season that year.

Vitamin C can prevent the flu.

FALSE

No, it can't. Many people think that taking daily vitamin C supplements will stop them getting flu, but there's no evidence to prove this.

The Flu vaccine contains the heavy metal Mercury.

FALSE

An ethyl mercury-based preservative known as "Thimerosal" is sometimes used in vaccines that contain more than one dose (multi-dose vials). It is used to prevent the growth of dangerous bacteria and fungus. It is not found in any of the childhood or adult vaccines routinely used in the UK. "Oxford Vaccine Group 2015"

Healthy people don't get the flu.

FALSE

Generally, 15-20% of the population gets flu each year – healthy people included! A healthy diet will help to boost your immune system but unfortunately can't prevent you from getting the flu.

It's too late to have my vaccine.

FALSE

It is never too late to get your flu vaccination. Flu vaccinations start in September and October but continue through to March, so it really is never too late to get your flu jab!

Getting a flu vaccine every year weakens my immune system.

FALSE

Getting a flu vaccination does not weaken your immune system and make you more likely to get the flu. Getting a flu vaccine prepares your immune system for the flu.

Flu and COVID-19

- If you have had COVID-19 you can still catch the flu; they are different viruses
- Unfortunately, the flu vaccine will not protect you against COVID-19
- Being protected against flu is particularly important if COVID-19 is still circulating because people vulnerable to COVID-19 are also at risk of complications from flu and new research suggests that having both flu and COVID-19 is associated with a greater risk of more severe illness and death.

Does having a flu vaccination mean that it is more likely you would catch other viruses, such as COVID-19 afterwards? Can having a flu vaccination reduce immunity to COVID-19?

The best and most up-to-date data show no increased risk of catching COVID-19 after having a flu vaccination. Recent Canadian research using a large number of participants, found there was no difference in the chances of getting COVID-19 between people who had received a flu vaccination in the most recent flu season and those that had not received a flu vaccination.

Can you/should you have flu vaccination after having COVID?

There is no reason why people who have recovered from COVID-19 should not have a flu vaccination. There is no evidence that you would have a relapse of COVID-19 due to the flu vaccine.

Can having COVID-19 reduce the effectiveness of a flu vaccination?

There is no evidence to date. In general, we do not see reduced effectiveness to a vaccine when someone is recovering from another respiratory virus. However, it is not known at this stage with COVID-19. If there is a reduced response to the flu vaccine from someone who is recovering from COVID-19 it is still advised it is better to have the vaccine to reduce the risk of catching flu.

After recovering from COVID-19, how long before it is safe to receive a flu vaccine?

There is no immunological reason or evidence that it would be unsafe for those who have had COVID-19 infection to receive the flu vaccine or that the flu vaccine would be less effective for these individuals. It is important to note that individuals who have had COVID-19 who are in the age groups and risk categories for whom flu vaccine is recommended are particularly vulnerable to the complications of flu and therefore helping to protect them through vaccination, is essential this season.

Children and the Flu Vaccine

Can the nasal flu vaccine give my child flu?

The nasal flu vaccine uses a live weakened influenza virus which does not cause clinical influenza. It has a good safety record and millions of doses have been given in the USA, Canada and Finland in addition to school aged and 2 & 3-year-old children in the UK for several flu seasons.

Can anyone else catch flu from a recently vaccinated child?

A small number of respiratory illnesses (including wheeze) were reported in the contacts of vaccinated children. Most of these events were self-limiting and some of them are likely to have been coincidental. Vaccinated children are known to shed virus for a few days after vaccination but it is less able to spread from person to person than the natural infection as the amount of virus shed is below the levels needed to pass on infection to others and the virus does not survive long outside of the body.

My child cannot have the nasal flu vaccine – is there an alternative?

If your child is in one of the clinical at-risk groups and has a contraindication to the nasal flu vaccine, the injectable vaccine should be given in its place. Also, healthy children who have family contacts who are very severely immunocompromised should be given an inactivated influenza vaccine (injection).

My child has not had the flu vaccine before. Is only one dose required as other vaccines have a course of 2 or 3?

Children aged 2-11 in the healthy children's programme require only one dose of the nasal flu vaccine, irrespective of whether they have had the flu vaccine before. Children aged 2 to less than 9 who are in a clinical at-risk group require 2 doses of flu vaccine given 4 weeks apart.

My child is asthmatic and on inhaled steroids. Is the nasal flu vaccine safe?

Children taking any dose of inhaled steroid can receive the nasal flu vaccine. If, however, the child is experiencing increased symptoms of wheezing and/or needing more reliever (blue inhaler) treatment in the last 72 hours, the injectable vaccine should be given to avoid a delay in protection. Children who take regular oral steroid tablets to control their asthma or have previously had an ICU admission for asthma exacerbation should consult with their specialist before accepting the nasal flu vaccine.

My child has a mild illness on the day of vaccination. Should I delay the vaccination?

The clinician would only advise to delay vaccination if the child had a fever; this is to avoid the situation where signs and symptoms of the illness are attributed to being side effects of the vaccine.

My child is allergic to egg. Should I refuse the nasal flu vaccination?

Egg allergic children can safely receive the nasal flu vaccination – even those who have had a previous anaphylactic shock. The only exception is those children who required admission to ICU – these children should have the vaccine administered in a hospital setting. All staff administering vaccines are trained to spot and treat anaphylaxis.

Children who have had an anaphylactic reaction to egg requiring ICU admission and have an underlying medical condition (such as asthma) should receive an injectable flu vaccine with a very low ovalbumin content or the cell-based vaccine for those children aged 9 or above.

Do flu vaccines contain pork gelatine?

The nasal flu vaccine contains a highly processed form of pork gelatine as one of its additives. The injectable flu vaccines **DO NOT CONTAIN GELATINE DERIVED FROM PIGS.**