

Protecting your child against flu

Vaccination for your school child
from P1 up to and including Year 12



School-based
programme

2024

Protecting your child against flu

The annual flu vaccination programme now includes all children from the age of 2 up to and including the fifth year of secondary school (Year 12).

From the autumn of 2024 the following children will be offered the flu vaccine:

- All pre-school children who are aged two or over on 1 September 2024. These children will be offered the vaccine at their GP surgery.
- All primary school children and those up to and including fifth year of secondary school (Year 12). These children will be offered the vaccine at school by the school health service.

This leaflet explains the benefits of flu vaccination for your school child.

Flu and COVID-19

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a virus called the coronavirus, and it can be serious for some people. Other viruses such as flu can also cause serious illness and if people got both COVID-19 and flu together they could become extremely unwell. So it is more important than ever that your child gets a flu vaccination every year.

Why is my child being offered the flu vaccine?

Vaccinating your child will help protect them against infection with the flu virus and also reduce further spread to other children and adults. Fluenz® is the name of the flu vaccine that will be offered to children. This vaccine has been shown to be very effective and so should help reduce the spread of infection.

What is flu like for children?

Children get the same unpleasant symptoms as adults – fever, chills, aching muscles and joints, headache and extreme tiredness. They can also have a stuffy nose, dry cough and sore throat. These symptoms can last between two and seven days. Some children have very high fever, sometimes without classic symptoms, and need to go to hospital for treatment. Complications arising from flu can include bronchitis, pneumonia and painful middle ear infection. In severe cases, which are very rare, flu can lead to disability and even death.

For children with some pre-existing medical conditions getting flu can lead to serious complications.

Why do we need to protect ourselves and our children against flu?

The flu virus spreads quickly and infects adults and children very easily, causing an unpleasant illness that may result in days spent in bed rather than at work, nursery, school or doing usual day-to-day activities.

How does flu spread?

The virus spreads through the air when people cough and sneeze without covering their nose and mouth. Other people then breathe in the virus directly or pick it up by touching surfaces on which it has landed. Because young children don't always cover their noses or mouths when coughing or sneezing they can spread the virus very quickly.

What vaccine will my child receive?

Fluenz[®] is the name of the vaccine that will be offered to most children. It has been available in the UK for the past ten years and has been shown to be more effective than other flu vaccines in children aged 2 to 17 years.

How will the vaccine be given?

Unlike most vaccines, Fluenz[®] is not injected. It is given as a spray up each nostril. The child can breathe normally while the vaccine is being administered. There is no need to actively inhale or sniff.

For medical reasons a very small number of children will not be able to receive Fluenz[®]. They will be given a different flu vaccine by injection instead.

Where will my child get Fluenz[®]?

School children up to and including Year 12 will be offered Fluenz[®] in school. It will be given by the school nurse.



If your child does not get the vaccine in school, for example if they are not at school on the day that it is offered, then you can contact your GP surgery to get it. This is especially important if your child is in one of the at-risk groups.

My child is in an at-risk group and normally gets the vaccine from their GP. Can they still get it there?

We would encourage them to have it in school along with the other children. If your child does get it from the GP it is very important that you tell the school nurse that he or she has had it and don't give consent for them to get it at school.

If you have already given consent and then they get it from their GP make sure you tell the school nurse (not the school) so they don't get it again.

I've heard that Fluenz® is live. Does this mean my child will get the flu?

No. Fluenz® contains viruses that have been weakened to prevent it causing flu but help your child build up immunity in the same way as a natural infection (but without the nasty symptoms). For this reason, the live Fluenz® vaccine is more effective than the injected vaccines, particularly in young children.

Individuals with weakened immune systems, however, may not be able to handle the weakened live viruses in Fluenz®. Therefore if your child has a weakened immune system it is important to indicate this on the consent form. These children need to be vaccinated, but it should be with the injected vaccine.

Will there be any side effects of Fluenz®?

Fluenz® is a very safe vaccine. A runny or stuffed nose is the most common side effect following the nasal spray.

Fluenz® is absorbed very quickly, so even if your child gets a runny nose or sneezes immediately after the spray, there's no need to worry, because it will still have worked. Full details of the side effects are provided in the Fluenz® patient information leaflet (see page 10).

Are there any children who shouldn't have Fluenz®?

- Children whose immune systems are severely weakened due to certain conditions or medical treatments should not have Fluenz®.

- Also, your child should not have Fluenz® if he or she has had a severe reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine, or any of the substances included in it. Please list all your child's allergies on the consent form so the nurse can check if he or she can have the vaccine.
- If your child is taking salicylates including acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) they should not receive Fluenz®.
- **Fluenz® is not recommended for children with active wheezing at the time of vaccination or in the previous three days, or who have very severe asthma.**

To help the nurse decide if your child can have Fluenz® it is very important on the consent form that you give full details of any inhalers, medicines or tablets your child is on, including the name, dose and how often he or she takes them.

If this changes after you have returned the form, but before your child has had the vaccine you should tell the school nurse.

Most of the children with these conditions can still be given the injected vaccine, so you should make sure you include the details of the condition or treatment on the consent form so the appropriate vaccine can be offered.

Also, people with very severely weakened immune systems, for example those needing treatment in isolation units, should avoid close contact with vaccinated children for two weeks because there is a very remote chance the weakened vaccine virus may be passed to them.

My child is allergic to egg. Can they have Fluenz®?

Most children with egg allergy can get the Fluenz® vaccine. It is only those who have had the most severe form of allergic reaction – an anaphylactic reaction which required an admission to intensive care - who can't be given it.

Make sure you put any allergy details on the consent form so the nurse can decide what is best for your child.

Will my child be protected for life when they've had Fluenz®?

No. The flu virus can change every year and a new vaccine has to be made to match it. So next year's vaccine may contain different viruses from this year's vaccine. This is why the vaccine is offered every year.

The vaccine isn't being offered in my child's school until December. Isn't that too late?

The vaccination programme will run from October until December, so some schools won't be visited until December. This is still enough time to make sure your child is protected before we start to see a lot of flu about.

The vaccine is being offered in my child's school just before they sit an important test/examination. Could this affect how they perform?

Only a minority of children have reactions to the vaccine and these are usually mild, such as a runny or stuffy nose. A few children may feel unwell with a bit of a temperature, if this happens then it can be dealt with the same as



if they are unwell on the day of the test for any other reason. It is up to you to decide if your child should have the vaccine but we would recommend it for the protection it will give them.

Does Fluenz® contain ingredients that come from pork? What does that mean for children from some faith groups?

Fluenz® vaccine contains a very small amount of gelatine that comes from pork. Gelatine is commonly used in a range of medicines. It is highly purified and used to stabilize the vaccine. A number of religious leaders have stated that it is acceptable to have this in a medicine form. However, it is up to individuals to decide if they find this acceptable for their child. If you don't wish your child to have this vaccine you can request the injected one which doesn't contain pork gelatine – please make sure you clearly state this on the consent form.

Where can I get more information about the Fluenz® vaccine?

We have tried to cover the most important points about the Fluenz® vaccine. However if you want more information you can get a copy of the patient information leaflet from the official Medicines website.

Visit www.medicines.org.uk/emc and type in 'Fluenz'.

Details of injected flu vaccines are also available on this site. If your child has to have an injected vaccine in school it is most likely to be Quadrivalent influenza cell-culture vaccine and you can look it up on this website.

You can also contact the school nurse to discuss any concerns you may have.

Summary of reasons why your child should have the Fluenz® vaccination

- It offers protection against those strains of flu virus that are most likely to be circulating each winter – protecting your child against a nasty disease that could require treatment in hospital.
- It helps reduce the spread of flu and helps protect those most at risk of its complications.
- It helps reduce the risk of parents and carers having to take time out of work to look after ill children.

- It has been given to millions of children worldwide and has an excellent safety record.
- It's quick and painless.

What should I do now?

You should carefully fill in the consent form giving all the details required and sign it to show whether or not you want your child to receive the vaccine. Please return it by the date shown. If your child's medical condition or medicines change after you have returned the form but before they are vaccinated, or they receive the vaccine from their GP, please contact the school nurse to inform them.

Remember, if you don't return the form then your child can't have the vaccine.

For more information about the flu vaccine talk to your GP, practice nurse, district nurse or pharmacist, or visit:

www.pha.site/flu

This leaflet is available in other formats and languages. For further details visit

www.publichealth.hscni.net



Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

www.publichealth.hscni.net

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