

## Should I have the Influenza Vaccination this winter?

### **What is influenza?**

Influenza (flu) is a virus which tends to circulate in higher numbers during winter months. Whilst we are only too aware of COVID, we must not forget about the risks of flu.

This is a different virus from Coronavirus which causes COVID. Whilst COVID-19 is considered to be a much more contagious disease, flu can affect you just as badly, and so it is important to prevent it.

Similar to the coronavirus, for most it causes what is commonly described as a mild flu like illness, with symptoms of muscle aches, chills, fatigue, fever, headaches, sore throat, runny nose, cough which lasts up to a week.

However, in some it can lead to complications such as shortness of breath and pneumonia requiring hospital admission, and prove deadly.

### **Vaccination**

We have known about Seasonal Influenza for some time, and as such there maybe some immunity in our communities already.

Wearing masks and keeping 2 meters of distance will be helpful in reducing spread of both Flu and COVID-19, ***however there is also a well-established vaccine which reduces your chances of catching Influenza.***

It is so important that we do not assume that this is a lesser virus, and people who are recommended a vaccine by their health care provider take up the offer.

The flu vaccination programme is recommended for all at risk adults.

### **Why?**

As we find that COVID-19 cases are on the rise, the importance and value of immunisation against influenza has never been more important than in this flu season to prevent you becoming unwell.

- If you are deemed to be in the higher risk groups above it is important to protect yourself as the risks of complications from flu are higher.
- Whilst protecting you against influenza does not protect you from COVID, Influenza can cause people to feel quite unwell and miserable, and in some cases really quite unwell and weak.
- It prevents you from potentially infecting a vulnerable contact or member of your household.

- There is a theoretical risk that if you are infected with influenza, you may become even more unwell if you were to catch COVID too.
- In an average winter, fewer than 1% of cases with Flu die, compared to 3.4% of COVID cases, but none the less not insignificant if it affects you or your family.
- If you were to develop viral symptoms during winter months, and have had a flu vaccination, it may be easier for health professionals to attribute the cause to COVID, leading to safer and more effective management of the condition.
- This will help reduce numbers of influenza admissions to hospitals, allowing them to have a greater capacity to manage patients with COVID-19

## **What?**

There are different vaccines recommended for different categories of patients:

- 1) A nasal vaccine for young children.
- 2) A quadrivalent vaccine which fights against 4 common strains of influenza in younger patients (under the age of 65).
- 3) A trivalent vaccine for over 65s (covering 3 strains of the virus); this is designed to fight against strains encountered by the older age group and provide a greater antibody immune response. This is not a live vaccine.

However, if you have egg allergies, or are vegetarian speak to your health care provider about which vaccine may be more appropriate for you.

## **Myths about the vaccine**

1. Qu: I've heard the influenza vaccine give you flu?  
A: this is not true! The vaccine is designed to create an immune response in the body so that if you do come into contact with flu in future your body will have memory of the vaccine response to fight the infection without you becoming unwell; MOST PEOPLE do not have any troublesome symptoms following the vaccination. For some they experience a sore arm, mild fever, mild body ache, and mild headache. This tends to last no more than 2-3 days.
2. Qu: Will the vaccine will protect me against COVID?  
A: No, this vaccine is for a different virus, influenza which circulates every winter.
3. Qu: If I have had COVID, Can I have the flu vaccine?  
A: There is no evidence to date that the vaccine causes harm to anybody who has had COVID.
4. Qu: I don't need the vaccine as I never get flu!  
A: This is all about prevention, and designed to protect you. We do not know how fatal this year's flu pandemic will be, and how COVID will impact on the spread. The more people who

have the vaccine, the less Flu will spread in communities, and if you are at risk, the risk of developing problems from Influenza are higher than ever this year.

### **Who should have a flu vaccine?**

The vaccine is recommended in the UK for the following groups of patients:

- patients aged 2 and 3
- those aged 65 or over
- pregnant women
- morbidly obese
- those in a clinical at-risk category of any age including:
  - those suffering from chronic respiratory disease (including asthma)
  - chronic heart disease
  - chronic kidney disease
  - chronic liver disease
  - chronic neurological disease
  - Asplenia or dysfunction of the spleen
  - immuno-suppression due to disease or treatment
  - diabetes mellitus
- living in long-stay residential or nursing homes or other long-stay health or social care facilities.
- Health and Social Care workers who work in these higher risk environments.
- Household contacts of anybody who is a shielding or immuno-compromised.

*If you are in one of these groups please contact your primary health care provider as soon as possible for a vaccine.*

There are plans to introduce a vaccination programme for patients aged 50-64. But the priority is to vaccinate those at risk first.

### **Where?**

Flu vaccines are now in stock for all high-risk patient groups.

If you are currently not in an eligible group, there may be private health care providers who have stocks of vaccines and will be able to vaccinate you.

### **When?**

The sooner you have your vaccination the better. Please make an appointment with your primary health care provider.

Feel assured that the clinical areas are cleaned and it is safe for you to come to your appointment.

Social distancing measures will be in place for your safety.

Please wear a mask to your appointment. The clinician administering the flu vaccine will be wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and wash their hands regularly.

Let your primary health care provider know about any reasonable adjustments that you may need such as extra time or somebody to go with you.

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