



# Flu vaccine

## What is the flu vaccine for?

The flu vaccine offers the best protection available against contracting the flu. The flu virus can affect people of all ages and is an unpleasant but usually self-limiting illness. The common symptoms include fever, cough, cold, chills, headache, muscle aches and severe tiredness. For some more vulnerable groups, such as young children, older people and individuals with health conditions (including muscle-wasting conditions), contracting the flu is more likely to lead to serious and life-threatening complications such as pneumonia or bronchitis. For these groups, the vaccine is available – for free – on the NHS.

The vaccine is available annually, as the protection it offers gradually decreases as time goes on. The virus that causes flu also often changes and so the vaccine is regularly adapted to reflect the newest strain.

For more information on the flu vaccine, consult the NHS website or visit your local pharmacy.

## Who should have the flu jab?

Anyone can have the flu jab (injection), but for certain groups it is recommended that they have one every year. For these more vulnerable groups, the NHS provides the jab free of charge. These groups include:

- ▶ everyone over the age of 65
- ▶ children and adults with underlying health conditions (such as respiratory disease, heart disease and muscle-wasting conditions)
- ▶ children and adults with a weak immune system owing to an underlying disease or treatment
- ▶ pregnant women.

People who want to have the flu jab but aren't eligible to get one for free can request one from their GP or pharmacy, at a small charge.

## Why should a person with a muscle-wasting condition have the flu jab?

The flu jab is recommended for people living with muscle-wasting conditions because of the additional risk the flu virus presents with some health conditions. GPs should consider people with muscle-wasting conditions a priority to have the vaccine.

An additional reason to take up the offer of the vaccine is the related implications for respiratory and cardiac health in some muscle-wasting conditions. This is because contracting the flu can have a more serious effect on people who have heart or breathing difficulties as part of their muscle condition. If you aren't sure if your condition could cause



these problems, refer to Muscular Dystrophy UK's [condition information](#) and seek the advice of your consultant.

You may be given medication or treatment (such as steroids), which affects or compromises your immune system. This can also increase your chance of contracting flu as it makes fighting the virus more difficult. For this reason, there is a recommendation for getting the vaccine in the Duchenne muscular dystrophy Standards of Care. If you're unsure if your medication affects your immune system, seek the advice of your consultant or the person that prescribed this medication to you.

## Is the flu jab safe?

With all vaccines, there is a small risk of allergic reaction. These usually present soon after having the jab, and the staff who give the vaccines are able to recognise such allergic reactions and know how to treat them immediately. If you have had an allergic reaction to a flu vaccine before, it is important that you discuss this with your doctor before getting any further immunisations.

You cannot get flu from the injection. There is also no evidence to suggest that people with muscle-wasting conditions are at any greater risk of allergic reactions to the flu vaccine than anyone else, as long as they don't have any other underlying conditions.

Always ask your consultant's opinion before having a flu vaccine. If you have any health conditions in addition to your muscle condition, or if you have any allergies, seek a doctor's advice before you get the flu jab.

## Is the nasal spray vaccine safe?

The nasal spray is another way of getting the vaccine. This, however, is not safe for anyone who is immunocompromised.

GPs routinely offer children the flu vaccine in the form of a nasal spray, rather than an injection. Children can get this annually, as with the injection, and it is offered to younger children and young people who are at increased risk of the flu, as listed above. There is evidence to suggest that the nasal spray is more effective than the injection for those under the age of 18. On the other hand, evidence suggests that the injection is more effective than the spray in preventing flu in adults.

Because the nasal spray is a live vaccine, it should not be given to children who are immunocompromised, as it can cause a severe flu illness. In some muscle-wasting conditions, such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy, children are routinely prescribed corticosteroids and these cause them to become immunocompromised. These children should receive the injectable flu vaccine instead of the nasal spray. If they have siblings who are due to have the nasal spray, the child who is immunocompromised should receive their vaccine at least two weeks before their siblings are immunised. This will give the vaccine time to work before children may become exposed to the live bacteria.



Your GP or consultant will advise you on the safest and most effective route to immunise your child against the flu.

## How do I get the flu jab?

Your local GP, and some pharmacies, offer the flu jab. Local midwifery services should also offer the vaccine to pregnant women.

## Are there any side-effects?

Some people experience side-effects from the jab, but these are rarely serious. Some people will experience aching muscles, a mild fever, and redness and swelling around the injection site. Some children experience a blocked or runny nose, reduced appetite and headache after the nasal vaccine. All of these side-effects generally subside within a few days.

There is no evidence of additional side-effects, or an increased chance of experiencing them, if you have a muscle-wasting condition.

If you are concerned about any side-effects, contact your GP or call the NHS non-emergency helpline on 111 for advice. Allergic reactions to the flu vaccine are rare, and usually occur immediately after you receive the vaccination. If you experience any severe side-effects, and feel you are in danger, call the emergency services on 999.

## Should my family members and carers also be vaccinated?

If you get the flu vaccine, it is recommended that anyone you regularly come into contact with should also have one. This is because while the vaccine offers the best available protection, it is still not proven to be 100 percent effective. You can actively decrease your risk of contracting the flu, by vaccinating yourself and ensuring those you live with or see regularly are immunised as well. If you're at increased risk of getting the flu, those who live with you, as well as your carers, will be eligible for the free vaccination on the NHS.

The family and carers of people who are immunocompromised must take extra care. See the section above about children and the flu vaccine, if this is relevant, or speak to a consultant for advice before getting the vaccine if you or your children will be in regular contact with a person who is immunocompromised.

## How else can I limit the risk of catching flu?

Avoid contact with friends and family who are experiencing flu-like symptoms. This is the most obvious way of limiting your chance of picking up the virus.

If you use techniques to help clear your airways, or use respiratory support devices, ensure you stick to your regime during 'flu season'. This will ensure your lungs are in the best health, and give you a better chance of fighting infection.

Your local GP practice will have information about other ways to avoid catching the flu, such as practising good hygiene and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.



## When can I have a flu jab?

The best time to have a flu vaccine is in October or November – just before the coldest time of the year, when more vulnerable groups are at increased risk of contracting the flu. You can also get the jab later in the winter. The vaccine takes 14 days to take effect, which is also worth remembering. For more information, contact your GP or pharmacist.

**Disclaimer**

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## Here for you

The friendly staff in the care and support team at the Muscular Dystrophy UK's London office are available on **0800 652 6352** or **info@muscular dystrophyuk.org** from 8.30am to 6pm Monday to Friday to offer free information and emotional support.

If they can't help you, they are more than happy to signpost you to specialist services close to you, or to other people who can help.

**[www.muscular dystrophyuk.org](http://www.muscular dystrophyuk.org)**