



Flu vaccinations and your child

Every winter sees various illnesses spread rapidly through families and communities and because of the Covid-19 pandemic, doctors are especially concerned about it this winter.

In addition to Covid-19, the NHS is preparing for coughs, colds, respiratory illnesses and flu that could affect people this winter as they mix more indoors.

To prepare, the NHS is encouraging anyone eligible to take up the free flu vaccine being offered this winter.

What is flu?

Flu is caused by a virus called influenza. It can be an unpleasant illness for a toddler, just as it is for an adult.

Fever, chills, aches and pains, a sore throat and a blocked nose are just some of the symptoms that can make your child tired, irritable and miserable for days.

Flu can also lead to serious complications such as bronchitis and even pneumonia, which need hospital treatment, so GPs will advise you to protect your child and get them vaccinated.

Who is eligible to get the vaccine?

The flu jab is available to all children in the UK who are aged two and three on August 31 of any given year.

Younger children may also be vaccinated if they are at a particularly high risk of catching flu – for example, if they have a long-term health condition.

The vaccine is also given to children in reception class, and all the way through primary school.

Doctors advise that all children with long-term health conditions, such as diabetes, heart or lung disease or asthma, should be vaccinated because coming down with flu can be extremely serious for them and lead to complications.

You should expect your GP to contact you about vaccinations without you having to ask.

Is the flu vaccine safe?

The flu vaccine for children in the UK has a good safety record, and has helped to stop the disease spreading to families and their local communities.

Vaccinating children helps keep others safe – such as younger siblings, grandparents, pregnant mums and anyone with a serious long-term illness.

Unlike the adult vaccine, the children's vaccine takes the form of a nasal spray – a single squirt up each nostril.

This removes the stress and pain of a needle, but it is also quick and, experts believe, more effective than an injection. Taken nasally, the vaccine is quickly absorbed and will work even if your child sneezes or blows their nose straight after.

The type of vaccine your child is given will differ every year because the main flu viruses change. It contains live, but weak flu

viruses that won't cause your children to be ill but will help them to build up immunity.

Toddlers and children up to the age of four will be given the vaccination at their GP surgery, usually by a practice nurse.

The nurse or doctor will usually advise you to delay the vaccine if your child is poorly with a runny or blocked nose, as this might stop it from being effective. Once they have recovered, it will be safe to have the vaccine.

For some children, the nasal vaccine is not suitable because they have other health issues. Children won't be given the nasal vaccine if they are severely allergic to eggs, have severe asthma, a weakened immune system – for example, if they're having chemotherapy – or an allergy to any of the ingredients contained in the vaccine. In these cases, your doctor may advise that they have the injectable vaccine instead.

As with all medicines, having the flu vaccine may cause side effects. The most common ones are runny or blocked nose, headache, tiredness or loss of appetite. In extreme cases, a child may suffer a severe reaction called anaphylaxis, which can be treated with adrenaline. The doctor or nurse administering the vaccine will be trained to spot any adverse reactions.

The vaccine is most effective before flu season, usually from December to March. If you haven't been offered a vaccine yet and would like one, then call your GP to discuss vaccinating your child.