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How will the new flu vaccination programme work?

As winter looms nearer, so too does flu season, and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it could prove more costly to the nation than usual.

That's why the government has expanded its yearly [flu vaccination](#) programme. An expanded vaccination programme not only ensures we keep infection rates as low as possible, it also helps ease pressure on the NHS at a time when we need our health service the most.

Doctor Charlie Easmon, founder of Your Excellent Health Service at Harley Street, explains the importance of the expanded [flu](#) vaccination programme.

The programme

Last month the government announced it would be expanding its flu vaccination programme to offer the jab freely to more people.

The comprehensive programme aims to vaccinate 30 million people during the upcoming flu season.

This year it will be offered free to:

- All people on the Shielded Patient List and members of their household.
- Children of school Year 7 age in secondary schools (aged 11 on 31 August 2020).
- Health and social care workers employed through Direct Payment (personal budgets) and/or Personal Health Budgets, such as Personal Assistants, to deliver home care.

As well as those usually offered the vaccine on the NHS:

- Children aged 2-10 years.
- People aged over 65.
- Pregnant women.
- People aged 6 months to under 65 years in clinical risk groups.
- People in long-stay residential care homes.
- Carers.
- Close contacts of immunocompromised people.

The NHS vaccination programme might be opened up to people aged 50-64 years on or before 31 March 2021 from November or December. This will depend on how many people in the groups above have been vaccinated and whether there is enough supply of NHS flu vaccine.

The expanded programme is part of plans to ready the NHS – both for the risk of a second peak of coronavirus cases, and to relieve winter pressures on A&E and emergency care, the Department of Health and Social Care said.

Upon announcing the expanded programme, Professor Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, said, "Flu can have serious consequences and vulnerable people can die of it. Having the vaccine protects you and helps reduce transmission to others.

"This winter more than ever, with COVID-19 still circulating, we need to help reduce all avoidable risks. Vaccinating more people will help reduce flu transmission and stop people becoming ill."

Jab for that

Dr Easmon explains that the expanded vaccination programme is designed to best protect the vulnerable during winter months, as well as the NHS.

"Winter invariably means the onset of flu," he says.

"This, with COVID-19, can cause huge pressures on the NHS. Fewer flu patients in hospitals means there is less pressure in the hospitals dealing with COVID-19 cases."

The programme will ultimately keep infection rates down and avoid 'bed blocking', he adds.

"For instance, keeping flu patient numbers down will mean that there are fewer carers who are ill and so can take care of more people as a result," he says.

"It takes some of the winter burden off the NHS and prevents two problematic viral diseases occurring at the same time in the same population."

How the programme will be delivered

As well as being expanded, the programme is likely to differ in other ways from how it is usually delivered, courtesy of COVID-19.

Those eligible for a free vaccine will be able to get theirs through their GP practice or local pharmacy, but due to COVID-19 conditions, arrangements will vary depending on the area you live in:

- This year there will be no walk-in flu clinics, which make planning for social distancing impossible.
- In some practices it will be possible to make a flu clinic appointment - but these will be spaced to ensure social distancing measures are maintained.
- In some areas, practices will be joining together to offer clinics at a separate location (a school hall or council premises, for instance) with better facilities for social distancing.

- Some practices may be offering drive-through services.

Those in the 'at risk group', including those who are shielding and their carers and households, will be the main focus to begin with. After the programme is underway the Department of Health will work with clinicians to decide whether/when to open the programme to those aged 50-64.

"Last year, the flu programme was expanded to include all primary school-aged children for the first time, and this year teams will be visiting secondary schools to vaccinate children in Year 7. This will help to contain the spread of this year's seasonal flu and not only protect children but also vulnerable adults they may be in contact with," a statement from the Department of Health said.

All front-line health and social care workers will also be urged to get their free vaccine to protect themselves and their patients or residents from the flu.

Those who aren't eligible for a free vaccine, but are able to get vaccinated privately - which usually costs around £10 from your pharmacist - are encouraged to do so to help protect those in the community who can't get the jab.

This creates a herd immunity - the more people that have their vaccine, the more resistant the community is to the virus, therefore the flu is less likely to spread as quickly as it would if vaccines didn't exist.

Why you need a vaccine every year

You need to get your flu jab every year because each flu season we are exposed to different variations of the virus. Over the year, the flu virus mutates, so we are likely to be exposed to a different bug than we were the winter before.

Each year the World Health Organization (WHO) looks at data on flu viruses and predicts which strains are likely to cause the biggest problems during winter.

It then produces a vaccine based on these viruses to protect you through the flu season. But the flu virus mutates incredibly quickly, so even once a vaccine has been produced a new virus of flu could be circulating.

"Flu is a nasty disease that can affect anyone, despite being in good health," Dr Easmon says.

"It causes death and illness in all groups but especially in those with pre-existing health conditions, those over 65 and the morbidly obese. Children often spread the flu to adults.

"In any one year the efficacy of the flu vaccine will vary in relation to how good a match the vaccine components are to the circulating disease. However, the overall efficacy of the vaccine is good."

There are three main types of flu virus that affect humans: A, B and C. Types A and B are the most common bugs spread in winter and cause more severe symptoms of aching, a high fever, coughing and sniffing. Type C is less common and usually causes less severe symptoms.

Type A is capable of infecting both humans and animals, while type B only infects humans. Both are culprits behind flu epidemics, although only type A has been [linked to pandemics](#).

The expanded flu vaccination programme comes alongside £3 billion for the NHS, announced in July by the Prime Minister, to relieve winter pressures on A&E and emergency care in case of a second spike in COVID-19 infections.

To find out more about the flu jab, or to book a time to have your vaccine, speak with your local pharmacist or, if eligible for a flu vaccine, keep an eye out for communications from your GP practice.

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