

NHS Update – October 2011

Passport to your flu jab

Health professionals in Wiltshire are encouraging people to get their flu vaccination this autumn, with a special reminder to those particularly 'at risk' by way of a new 'Flu Vaccination Passport'. Flu is a highly infectious illness that spreads rapidly through the coughs and sneezes of people who are carrying the virus. If someone is at risk of complications from flu, it's really important they have their annual flu jab.

This year NHS Wiltshire, in partnership with Wiltshire GPs, is making it easy for people to remember to have their jab by providing a health 'Passport', available from GP surgeries. The Passport will help to act as a reminder for people with busy lives to call their GP and arrange to receive valuable protection against flu. Flu symptoms can hit quite suddenly and severely. They usually include fever, chills, headaches and aching muscles and are often accompanied by a cough and sore throat. Because flu is caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics won't treat it.

Anyone can get flu, but it can be more serious for certain people, such as:

- people aged 65 or over
- people who have a serious medical condition
- pregnant women

Individual passports have been designed for each of these 'at risk' groups.

People in these groups are more vulnerable to the effects of seasonal flu (even if they are usually fit and healthy) and it's recognised that they can go on to develop a more serious illness, such as bronchitis and pneumonia, which could result in a stay in hospital. Flu can also make existing medical conditions worse, so it's important people to take up the offer of a vaccination.

Useful information about flu:

Get the jab

The best time of the year to get a flu vaccination is now - the autumn. It's free and it's effective against the latest flu virus strains. Even if someone has already had a flu jab in previous years, they need another one this year to keep immunity up to date. The flu jab may only protect someone for a year, because the viruses that cause flu are always changing. This year's seasonal flu vaccination also includes a vaccine to protect against swine flu. See your GP about the flu jab if you're 65 or over, or if you have any of the following problems (however old you are):

- a serious heart complaint
- a chest complaint or breathing difficulties, including asthma, bronchitis and emphysema
- serious kidney disease
- diabetes
- lowered immunity due to disease or treatment such as steroid medication or cancer treatment
- if you have a problem with your spleen or you have had your spleen removed
- if you have ever had a stroke

Your GP may advise you to have a flu jab if you have serious liver disease, multiple sclerosis (MS) or some other diseases of the nervous system. If you think you may need a flu vaccination,

check with your GP, practice nurse or your local pharmacist. If a nurse visits you regularly, ask about getting your flu vaccination. Most GP surgeries arrange vaccination sessions in the autumn.

Pregnant women

Pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy should have the seasonal flu jab. That's because pregnant women are more prone to complications from flu that can cause serious illness for both mother and baby. If you are pregnant and catch flu, talk to your GP urgently as you may need treatment with antiviral medicine.

The pneumo jab

When you see your GP for a seasonal flu jab, ask whether you also need the 'pneumo jab' to protect you against some forms of pneumococcal infection. It's available free on the NHS to everyone aged 65 or over, and for younger people with some serious medical conditions.

Kids and carers

If you're the parent of a child (over the age of six months) who has a long-term condition such as a serious respiratory or neurological condition, they should have a flu jab. Speak to your GP about your child having a flu vaccination. Your child's condition may get worse if they catch flu. If you're the carer of an elderly or disabled person, make sure they've had their flu jab. As a carer, you could be eligible for a flu jab too. Ask your GP for advice, or go to Carers Direct for information about Flu jabs for carers.

How effective is it?

No vaccine is 100% effective, however, people who have had the flu jab are far less likely to get flu. If you do get flu despite having the jab, it will probably be milder than if you haven't been vaccinated. The flu jab doesn't cause flu as it doesn't contain live viruses. However, you may experience side effects after having the jab, such as a temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards. Your arm may feel sore at the site where you were injected. More severe reactions are rare.

The flu vaccine only protects against flu, but not other illnesses caused by other viruses, such as the common cold.

Speak to your GP, practice nurse or pharmacist if you have any further questions.