

# Flu Vaccination

Flu season has us all preparing for an onslaught of sneezes and wheezes. While vitamins and a hot water bottle may do the trick for some, high risk groups of people should be getting a flu vaccination to prevent severe illness.

## What is 'flu'?

"Flu", otherwise known as "influenza" is a viral infection transmitted through the air from one person to another. Like a cold it may cause symptoms such as a cough, sore throat and headache. However, flu is a much more serious condition. Thousands of people die each year due to complications like pneumonia (an infection of the lung) caused by influenza.

Influenza is a group of viruses similarly related. These viruses have the potential to mutate, changing form. This makes it very difficult for people to build up immunity to the infection. Each time you are infected with a slightly different strain your body has little in the way of protection against it.

For most people, flu is an unpleasant but not really life threatening condition. You may be ill and miserable, but you will survive.

But this isn't true for certain vulnerable groups of people.

## What is a flu vaccine?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) monitors the global flu strains constantly. Each season they assess, based on previous flu strains and current mutation trends, what the likely strain of flu will be during the following flu season.

Based on this they create a vaccine before the flu season starts. Separate vaccines are made for the Northern and Southern hemisphere.

A flu vaccine is an injectable egg-based vaccine that protects you against the current flu strain. It will not necessarily protect you entirely from getting flu, but will lessen the severity of the flu.

## Who should have a vaccine?

The flu vaccine is designed to protect those who could get severe flu infection and potentially die. It is thus normally recommended in those people who are at risk of severe flu infection:

- Those over the age of 65 or under 5
- Those with chronic lung diseases (asthma, emphysema etc.)
- Those with heart diseases
- Those with chronic liver diseases (including liver cirrhosis)
- Those who are immunosuppressed (those with HIV or who are receiving drugs to suppress the immune system such as chemotherapy and longterm steroids) and their household contacts
- All people who are institutionalised in an environment where influenza can spread rapidly, such as in prisons or nursing homes
- Healthcare workers (both to prevent sickness and to prevent spread to patients) Anyone can have the flu vaccine. The only severe side effect is an allergic reaction (usually to egg products in the vaccine).



Member of the Global  Group