



## Volunteers Briefing Flu Season 2015/16

### What is flu?

**'Flu' – short for influenza, is an infectious and common viral illness spread by coughs and sneezes.**

It's not the same as the common cold. Flu is caused by a different group of viruses. Symptoms tend to be more severe and last longer.

You can catch flu all year round, but it is especially common in winter, which is why it is also known as "seasonal flu".

Flu is a highly infectious viral illness. It comes on quickly and includes fever and aching muscles. It makes you feel too unwell to continue your usual activities.

Flu causes a sudden high temperature, headache and general aches and pains, extreme fatigue and a sore throat. You can also lose your appetite, feel nauseous and have a cough.

Flu symptoms can make you feel so exhausted and unwell that you have to stay in bed and rest until you feel better.

Complications from flu, serious illness and mortality are highest among older people, pregnant women, those with underlying medical conditions, especially chronic respiratory disease, cardiac disease and those who are immunosuppressed.

### Why have the flu vaccine?

- It reduces the risk of those people who aren't vaccinated being exposed to the infection.
- It protects the person who receives the vaccine.
- In the UK, it is estimated that about 3,000 – 4,000 deaths are attributed to influenza during a typical season. This figure rises considerably during an epidemic (Public Health Wales, 2012)
- The flu vaccine is free and easily available from your GP Practice and some local pharmacies.
- It's very important for at least 75% of the people who are 'at risk' to be vaccinated. This means that individuals who cannot be vaccinated will also benefit e.g. babies younger than 6 months of age who aren't able to receive the vaccine, and people who have contra indications to the vaccine. Hywel Dda University Health Board have one of the lowest uptake rates for flu vaccine in Wales (see figures below)

Flu uptake 2014/15	Over 65 years	'At risk' groups	Carers	Pregnant women
All Wales	68.0%	49.3%	53.4%	45.5%
Hywel Dda	64.9% *	46.2%	50.2%	42.9%
Ceredigion	59.9%	44.0%	52.2%	47.5%
Carmarthenshire	67.0%	48.3%	53.2%	44.2%
Pembrokeshire	65.7%	44.7%	46.1%	38.6%

\* Lowest in Wales

## The flu vaccine

Because of the changing nature of influenza viruses, the flu vaccine contains different strains of the flu virus every year (as recommended by the World Health Organisation). This is why it is important to receive a flu vaccine every year.

It's important to get the flu vaccine early before flu circulates, as antibodies take up to 2 weeks to reach protective levels.

A flu vaccine is available free on the NHS for the following groups of people:

- Adults aged 65 or older
- People with any of the following medical conditions (age 6 months and over)
  - Chronic respiratory disease
  - Chronic heart disease
  - Chronic kidney disease
  - Chronic liver disease
  - Chronic neurological disease
  - Diabetes
  - Immunosuppression
  - Asplenia /dysfunction of the spleen
- Pregnant women
- Carers
- Children aged two, three and pupils in reception, years 1 and 2 in school
- Health and social care staff
- Community First Responders
- Members of voluntary organisations
- People living in long-stay residential care homes or other long-stay care facilities.

The flu vaccine is available from the beginning of October each year. If you think you need it, talk to your GP or practice nurse

More information can be found at:

- Hywel Dda University Health Board <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/862/page/75110>
- [www.beatflu.org](http://www.beatflu.org)
- [www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk) or phone NHS Direct Wales on 0845 46 47



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## Some Flu Myths

### 1. Having flu is just like having a heavy cold

**No it isn't!** A bad bout of flu is much worse than a heavy cold. Flu symptoms come on suddenly and sometimes severely. They include fever, chills, headaches and aching muscles, as well as a cough and sore throat. So you're likely to spend two or three days in bed. If you get complications caused by flu, you could become seriously ill and have to go to hospital.

### 2. Having the flu vaccine gives you flu

**No, it doesn't.** The injected flu vaccine that is given to adults contains inactivated flu viruses, so it can't give you flu. Your arm may feel a bit sore where you were injected, and some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, but other reactions are very rare.

The children's flu nasal spray vaccine contains live but weakened flu viruses that will not give your child flu.

### 3. Once you've had the flu vaccine, you're protected for life

**No, you aren't.** The viruses that cause flu can change every year, so you need a vaccination each year that matches the new viruses. The vaccine usually provides protection for the duration of the flu season that year.

### 4. I'm pregnant, so I shouldn't have the flu jab because it will affect my baby

**Yes, you should have the vaccine at whatever stage of pregnancy you are.** If you're pregnant, you could get very ill if you get flu, which could also be bad for your baby. Having the jab can also protect your baby against flu after it's born and during the early months of life.

### 5. If I missed having the flu jab in October, it's too late to have it later in the year

**No, it's not too late.** It's better to have the flu vaccine as soon as it becomes available, but it's always worth getting vaccinated before flu comes around. Since we don't know when flu will strike, the sooner you have the vaccine the better.