

Information for schools on the children's flu immunisation programme.

From September 2013 the annual influenza (flu) vaccination programme will include offering a nasal spray flu vaccine to Year 7 pupils during the autumn term. Over the following years this programme will be extended to include all children aged two to 16 years.

Why is the vaccine being introduced for children?

Children can get flu, just like adults. Flu infection in children results in absence from school, many GP visits, hospital admissions and can cause severe complications especially in young children. Vaccinating children will help protect them from the flu virus. It will also reduce further spread of flu to family and friends.

The nasal spray vaccine being offered, Fluenz[®] is a more effective vaccine than existing flu vaccines in children. It has been used in the USA for 10 years and has a good safety record. The vaccine was available for use in the UK last year, and was offered to children at increased risk of flu.

How is the children's flu programme being rolled out in Wales?

The following children will be offered the flu vaccine in 2013:

- all children who are aged two or three years on 1 September 2013 (children born between 2 September 2009 and 1 September 2011) will be offered vaccination through their GP surgery
- all children in year 7 in September 2013 will be offered vaccination as part of a school based programme

The programme will then be extended over the next few years to include all children aged two to 16 years.

Why are only some children being offered the vaccine now?

The extended flu vaccination programme is being phased in over a few years so that arrangements can be put in place for annual vaccination of all children two to 16 years of age.

Two and three year olds are being offered Fluenz[®] in the first year as they are the group most vulnerable to flu because they are unlikely to have any protection from previous infections, and younger children are more likely to require hospital admission.

Offering vaccine to year 7 pupils will test the delivery mechanisms to ensure successful implementation of the programme.

What is flu like for children?

Children get the same unpleasant symptoms as adults:

- fever
- chills
- aching muscles and joints
- headache
- extreme tiredness

They can also have a stuffy nose, dry cough and sore throat. These symptoms can last between two and seven days. Some children have very high fever, sometimes without classical symptoms, and need to go to hospital for treatment.

Complications arising from flu can include bronchitis, pneumonia and painful middle ear infection. Younger children are more at risk and more likely to need hospital treatment.

It is estimated that up to 1 in 10 children present to their GP with Flu each year.¹ Death from influenza is uncommon in children. Around 50 children died from flu each year in England between 2001-2009. Around 40% of these children did not have any risk factors for flu.²

For children with some pre-existing medical conditions, getting flu can be very serious as it is likely to make their condition much worse.

How will the vaccine will be given?

Fluenz[®] is given as a spray up each nostril. The child can breathe normally while the vaccine is being administered. Parents, children and nurses prefer the nasal spray vaccine to the injectable vaccine.

Can the vaccine give children flu?

No. Fluenz[®] contains viruses that have been weakened to prevent it causing flu but help children build up immunity in the same way as a natural infection (but without the nasty symptoms). For this reason, the live Fluenz[®] vaccine is more effective than the injected vaccines, particularly in children.

Are there any side effects of the vaccine?

A runny or stuffy nose is the most common side effect following the nasal spray. Fluenz[®] is a very safe vaccine that has been used for more than 10 years in America with millions of doses given.

Can all children receive the Fluenz[®] vaccine?

Fluenz[®] will be suitable for most children. A child should not receive Fluenz[®] if he or she:

- has a severely weakened immune system due to certain conditions or medical treatments
- has had a severe life threatening reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine, or any of the substances included in it
- is taking salicylates including aspirin
- has active wheezing at the time of vaccination or very severe asthma
- has an allergy to eggs

People with very severely weakened immune systems – for example, those needing treatment in isolation units – should avoid close contact with vaccinated children for two weeks because there is a very small chance that the vaccine virus may be passed to them.

Parents of children who cannot receive the nasal spray vaccine will be advised to contact their GP surgery to arrange a flu vaccine injection.

Are children protected from flu for life?

No. Flu viruses can change every year and a new vaccine has to be made to match them. Children will need to be vaccinated every year to get the best protection against flu. Further information about the roll out of the programme over the next two years will be available at the time.

How will the school be involved in the flu vaccination programme?

The flu vaccine needs to be given early each autumn before flu starts to circulate in the community. Arrangements will be similar to existing school based immunisations. Local arrangements will be made by your school nursing team who will be in touch to agree what will be required. A parental letter, leaflet and consent form will need to be circulated to all pupils due to receive the vaccine, and the completed consent form returned prior to vaccination. A suitable room will need to be made available for the vaccination session and pupils should be reminded of the time/date to attend.

Where can I get further information?

For further information please contact your named school nurse who will be able to advise on information and resources for parents and pupils.

The Chief Medical Officer Influenza letter

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/cmo/publications/cmo/2013/?lang=en>

More information on influenza and vaccination is available from

<http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/f/article/flu,seasonal/>

Childrens flu leaflet 2013 is available from

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/protection/immunisation/leaf/flu/?lang=en>

Template school flu vaccine slide presentation available from:

www.publichealthwales.org/SchoolFluVaccine

Patient information leaflet for Fluenz®

<http://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/medicine/26952>

References

1. Paget W.J., Balderston C., Casas I., Donker G., Edelman L., Fleming D., Larrauri A., Meijer A., Puzelli S., Rizzo C., Simonsen L., EPIA collaborators (2010) Assessing the burden of paediatric influenza in Europe: the European Paediatric Influenza Analysis (EPIA) project. *European Journal of pediatrics* 169(8):997-1008
2. Pebody RG, McLean E, Zhao H et al. (2010) Pandemic Influenza A (H1N1) 2009 and mortality in the United Kingdom: risk factors for death, April 2009 to March 2010. *Eurosurveillance*; 15(20).
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