

The Childhood Flu Immunisation Programme 2015

Information for Schools

This information explains the reason for extending the national flu immunisation programme to children and answers questions that schools might have about their participation in the programme.

Background to the programme

The flu vaccination programme is based on independent expert advice from the Joint Committee on vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). JCVI advises the four UK Health Ministers. In formulating its advice and recommendations, the Committee's aim is to ensure that the greatest benefit to public health is obtained from the most appropriate vaccination and immunisation strategies.

The current flu vaccination policy aims to reduce the serious morbidity and mortality due to flu by immunising those people most at risk of serious illness or death should they develop flu. This policy is in line with most other countries that have seasonal influenza vaccination programmes.

Another benefit of vaccination is to reduce transmission of the infection, thereby contributing to the protection of vulnerable patients who cannot be vaccinated or may not respond well to their own immunisations.

In July 2012, the JCVI recommended extending the programme to healthy children. This programme will lower the potentially serious impact of influenza on those children vaccinated but should also have a more profound effect on influenza transmission. Children are the main source of transmission in the population, and this programme will therefore reduce the spread of infection from children to other children, to adults and to those in clinical risk groups of any age.

An important factor in introducing this programme at this stage has been the availability of a vaccine that is given as a spray into the nose. This is easier to give than an injection, especially to large numbers of young children and has also been shown to be more effective in children.

JCVI recommended that the vaccine be offered to all children aged 2 – 16 years. This represents a very large increase in the flu vaccination programme, especially for school nursing teams and it is therefore being introduced in a phased way.

Questions and answers for schools

Which children will be offered the vaccination this autumn?

From September 2014 vaccination against flu was offered to all pre-school children aged two years and over by their GP. Primary school age children were vaccinated in the schools by school nursing teams. The same programme will be offered in autumn 2015.

When do the vaccinations need to take place?

Children will be offered the flu vaccine every year in the autumn term. It needs to be offered every year because flu viruses are always changing, so the vaccines are made each year to provide protection against the current circulating flu viruses. To be most effective, the vaccine should be given in the autumn or early winter before flu starts to circulate in the community. Because the vaccines have to be manufactured each year they do not become available until mid to late September. It is for these reasons that there is only a short period of about 8 weeks in which to give the vaccine.

Why is the vaccination being delivered through schools?

There is evidence from the implementation of other immunisation programmes that schools-based immunisation programmes provide a very effective means of reaching and delivering important health programmes to school-aged children, ensuring good uptake. The first two years of the programme have reinforced this with excellent uptake rates being achieved in schools in Northern Ireland.

School involvement

The partnership relationship between education and school nursing is fundamental to achieving a high uptake of the flu programme and to ensuring a safe and efficient vaccination session in the school setting.

The programme requires a high degree of collaboration, coordination and information exchange between schools, parents and school nursing.

Teacher support and participation has without doubt contributed to the excellent success of the flu program in N Ireland, the influence of the school staff, both teachers and clerical is an important factor in returning consent forms and assisting on the day of clinic.

Schools play an important role in ensuring that:

1. class lists are accurate;
2. confirming date of vaccination with the school team and adhering to that date
3. that consent forms are sent to parents prior to the school based flu programme and that they are returned in a timely manner;
4. verification of the identity of children consented for vaccination on the day and assist with the flow of children to, from and supervision of children during the clinic.

School nursing teams have a very tight timeframe of eight weeks in which to complete vaccination in schools.

Schools will be contacted towards the end of the school year, prior to the flu programme commencing the following Autumn, to consider local arrangements.

What will schools be asked to do?

Schools will be asked to:

- work with the school nursing team to develop and agree the best approach for implementing the programme in the school. The more time that is given to planning, the more likely it is that the programme will run smoothly;
- identify a designated point of contact for planning & communication;
- agree a date for the vaccination session and provide a suitable location for the immunisation to take place (e.g. school hall). The school nursing team will discuss their specific requirements;
- ensure class lists are accurate and in , alphabetical order; include address; date of birth; contact telephone number for person with parental responsibility and the name of class teacher listed on top of each class list;

- send consent information home with children, collect completed consent forms in a timely manner ,organize returns by class list and accompany children to and from the vaccination session where necessary
- identify any pupil movements in and transfer of pupils out since the class lists were provided so that up to date information is available

A timeline for planning the programme is available within Appendix 1 to help ensure the flu programme runs smoothly and efficiently.

Won't delivering the vaccinations through schools cause upheaval to school programmes?

We appreciate that delivering most of the programme through schools will involve children being away from lessons for a time. However, for the individual child this should not be for a long period, as the vaccination itself only takes a few minutes. Successful immunisation of the child will help protect them and other children and staff at the school against flu. This in turn is likely to reduce sickness rates from flu and help children stay in school, improving their educational opportunities, as well as reducing staff absenteeism from flu. Overall, therefore, this programme should benefit schools and reduce disruption.

The local health service is already accustomed to working closely with schools when delivering vaccinations and the local Health & Social Care Trusts' school nursing teams will continue to work with schools to ensure minimum disruption.

Who will be giving the vaccine to the children?

At a local level, the programme will be delivered by a school nursing team including the school nurse, public health staff nurses, child health assistant staff and administrative staff. They may be part of the school nursing team, or from a specialist immunisation team. Registered nurses will administer the vaccination.

What are the arrangements for parents consenting to vaccinations?

Parental consent will be arranged via a letter, information leaflet and consent form that the school nursing team will provide. This will be sent home with the child. It should be signed by parents and returned to the school prior to the vaccination session. If any children have already received the flu vaccine in general practice, parents should indicate this on the consent form,

so that the child is not offered another flu vaccination.

What happens if parents change their mind and withdraw consent?

It is very important that the school nurses know about this. If a parent contacts the school to say they are withdrawing consent they should preferably be told that they should contact the school nurse to give them this information, or the school must make sure they pass on the information to the school nurse before the vaccination session. Schools will have contact numbers for all school nursing teams.

Can parents refuse to have their child vaccinated?

Yes. Parents will need to give their consent for the vaccination. (no child will be vaccinated without parental consent)

What happens if a child is not present on the day when the school nursing team comes into the school to offer flu vaccination?

If a child misses the vaccination or is unwell on the day the parent will be sent a letter by the school nursing team explaining that they should contact their GP to arrange an appointment to get the vaccination.

Has the education profession been consulted about this programme?

Yes, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been working with the Department of Education to ensure that its views on how the programme is delivered are reflected.

Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge documents produced by Public Health England on which much of this document is based.

Appendix 1

Timeline for the Implementation of School Based Flu Vaccination Programme 2015

Developing a timeline will help the programme run smoothly and efficiently

Month	Action
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public Health Agency (PHA) Letter to Education Authority PHA Letter to Principals PHA Letter to Link Officers in Education Boards Texting Service/Education Authority Website
May - June (beginning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A member of school nursing team will contact school to begin partnership planning Schools to identify key staff
Mid-end June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A member of school nursing team will contact schools to confirm the date the vaccination programme will be held A member of School Nursing team will begin planning
End of June to beginning of July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools to provide updated class lists containing pupils name; address; date of birth; contact telephone number for person with parental responsibility Class lists to be in alphabetical order Name of class teacher listed on top of each class list Schools to identify any pupil movements in and transfer of pupils out
August to Mid September	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A member of school nursing team will contact schools to confirm date and time for the immunisation session (via email/letter) Schools to confirm class lists School Nursing team will deliver the parent information consent envelope to schools and confirm date and time for the letters to be issued to parents & returned Schools to distribute envelopes to parents for return within one week Schools can assist by ensuring consent envelopes are returned one week via school parent texting service/reminders Schools to oversee return of parental consent envelopes and returns organised by class School nursing team will collect envelopes at school
End of Sep to end of programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above points 4 to 6 Arrangements are confirmed locally in the lead up to immunisation sessions