

Childhood Flu Immunisation Programme

2020-21: information for schools

**Compiled by PHA Health Protection Directorate, Immunisation Team
August 2020**

This information explains the reason why the national flu immunisation programme is given to all children and answers questions that schools might have about their participation in the programme.

Please do make this information available to all staff in your school, particularly those who are likely to speak to parents or children about the vaccination.

Introduction

The flu vaccination programme in schools will be going ahead in the autumn term. It is likely that flu and COVID-19 will both be circulating at the same time which means that it is more important than ever this year to help protect against flu.

As well as all primary school aged children being offered the flu vaccine, this coming season the Government is extending the programme to year 8 children in secondary schools.

Flu kills thousands of people every year. It is an unpredictable virus and the vaccine is the best protection we have against it. The main purpose of the school aged annual flu vaccination programme is to reduce transmission in the community. Children can pass flu on to others in their immediate family and wider community, many of whom may be at higher risk from the complications of flu. Children whose parents agree for them to have the nasal spray vaccine also benefit from the protection it provides to them as individuals. It helps to contribute to a healthy school environment, reduces school absences, and indirectly protects teachers as they are less likely to catch flu from their pupils.

The flu vaccination won't protect against COVID-19 but it is critical to protecting the general health of the population, particularly those at high risk from COVID-19.

The partnership relationship between education and school nursing, and teacher support and participation is fundamental to achieving a high uptake of the flu vaccine programme and to ensuring a safe and efficient vaccination session in the school setting. School nursing teams have a very tight timeframe of eight weeks in which to complete vaccination in schools. The programme therefore requires a high degree of collaboration, coordination and information exchange between schools, parents and school nursing.

We are grateful for the support that schools have given by hosting vaccination sessions. Delivering the programme this year could be more difficult because of policies to reduce transmission of COVID-19. Your local Health and Social Care School nursing teams will work with you to deliver the programme according to guidelines that are current at the time. This may involve doing things differently this year.

Schools also have a key role in promoting uptake of the flu vaccination programme through the relationship that you have with parents. The influence of the school staff, both teachers and clerical, is also an important factor in returning consent forms and assisting on the day of clinic. Please use all your communication channels to help promote uptake. This year we would like a concerted effort to increase it substantially as we need to reduce the impact of flu on the health and social care. To assist with this, this year the Public Health Agency have developed a short video aimed at children, parents and all staff, and we would encourage you to share this widely through your communication channels.

Questions and answers for schools

What is the annual seasonal flu vaccine programme?

The Northern Ireland Flu Vaccination Programme is a long-standing programme that is based on independent expert advice from a national committee that advises the four UK Health Ministers. The current flu vaccination policy aims to reduce serious morbidity and mortality from flu by immunising those people most at risk of serious illness or death from flu. Introduction of the flu vaccination programme also reduces transmission of the infection in the community, thereby contributing to protection of vulnerable people who cannot be vaccinated or may not respond well to their own immunisations. This policy is in line with most other countries that have seasonal influenza vaccination programmes. It is 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.

Why is the flu vaccine offered to school aged children?

In autumn 2013, the Northern Ireland Flu Vaccination Programme was extended to include all school aged children. The purpose of this was to lower potential serious impacts of flu in children and to further reduce transmission of flu in the community. Children are the main source of transmission in the population and can pass flu on to others in their immediate family and wider community, many of whom may be at higher risk from the complications of flu. Offering flu vaccine to children 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 the school based flu vaccine programme has been the availability of a vaccine that is given as a spray into the nose. This is easier to give, especially to large numbers of young children, and has been shown to be more effective.

Why is flu vaccine delivered through schools?

There is evidence from 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 seven years of the programme have reinforced this with excellent uptake rates being achieved in schools in Northern Ireland.

Has the education profession been consulted about this programme?

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

Why does COVID-19 mean the school-based flu vaccination programme is so important this year?

Many people who are vulnerable to serious COVID-19 disease are also most at risk from complications of flu. This year, it is extra important that we help to keep these people well by reducing the chances of them getting flu. We also want to reduce pressure on our health and social care organisations. Those at risk from flu are offered the flu vaccine for their own protection but we also want to further reduce flu transmission in the community by vaccinating children.

There are also benefits for the school from vaccinating the children against flu. It helps to provide a healthy school environment by protecting the pupils and, indirectly, the staff. Research has shown that the programme has reduced school absences. This year, given the disruption there has already been to education, it is important to reduce any further time lost by pupils being away from school. It will also reduce confusion that may arise given that symptoms of flu are similar to COVID-19 symptoms.

Which children will be offered the vaccination this autumn?

The same as previous years, all primary school age children will be offered flu vaccine and vaccinated in schools by their local Health and Social Care Trust School Nursing teams. This autumn 2020, the Government has also **extended the programme to all School Year 8 children in post-primary schools.**

Outside the school setting and delivered by GPs, the flu vaccine is also offered to all pre-school children, aged two to four years, and children aged 6 months to 2 years and aged 12 to 18 years who have underlying health conditions that put them at greater risk of complications of flu.

Why is the programme being extended to Year 8 children?

This year we have secured additional vaccine to enable us to extend the programme into secondary schools in 2020/21. This is part of our wider planning for winter, as we are likely to see both flu and COVID-19 circulating at the same time. Although it is the first time Year 8 pupils will be offered the vaccine, these pupils will have been offered the flu vaccine when they were in primary school so both they and their parents will be familiar with the programme. We ask you to work with your local HSC Trust school nursing teams as you have done in the past with other vaccine programmes delivered through secondary schools.

When does vaccination need to take place?

To be most effective, flu vaccine needs to be given during the autumn term (October to Mid- December) before flu tends to circulate. The flu vaccines are manufactured every year and do not become available until late September. There is only a short period of about eight weeks to vaccinate all children. As the flu virus can change each year, vaccination is required annually.

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;
- Ensure class lists are accurate and that the most up to date information is available for school nurse teams - move computerised class list up at the end of June, identify pupil movements in and transfer of pupils out since class lists were created
- Identify a designated point of contact for the school nurse team to liaise with
- Agree a date for the vaccine session with school nursing teams and ensure the date is adhered to unless there are exceptional circumstances
- Provide a suitable location for the immunisation to take place (e.g. school hall). The school nursing team will discuss specific requirements;
- Send information (including consent forms) home with children, collect completed consent forms in a timely manner and give unopened envelopes, by class, to school health.
- Inform parents know which day vaccination will take place and let children know what will happen. In the event of exceptional closure on the day of flu vaccination a date will be reoffered or rescheduled. Schools will be asked to advise parents of this new date.
- Endorse the school flu vaccine programme and send reminders through your usual channels such as email or text distribution lists, parent newsletters, website, visual display screens etc.
- Assist school nurses in identifying the correct child for vaccine, for example if they are in P1, English is not their first language or there are children in the class with similar names
- Supervise and assist with flow of children to, from and during sessions as directed by the school nurse teams

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

How will the programme be different this year?

Your local HSC Trust school nursing teams will work with you to deliver the programme according to guidelines on reducing transmission of COVID-19 that are current at the time. This may involve doing things differently this year.

Won't delivering flu vaccine through schools cause upheaval to the school?

The local health service is 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.

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.

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?

The Trust school nursing teams will provide schools with envelopes for parents that contains a letter explaining the programme, the PHA flu vaccine for children information leaflet and a consent form for signature. This will be sent home with the child and should be signed by parents and returned to the school as soon as possible and prior to the vaccination session.

We would like to remind all schools that consent forms contain sensitive medical information and should be treated as confidential at all times. 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.

School staff should redirect enquiries and declines to the school nurse.

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 be told that they should contact the school nurse to give them this information rather than the message being taken by the school. This ensures that the school nurses can obtain all the information they need directly from the parent and can discuss their decision with them. 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 if the vaccination session in school is scheduled around the Transfer Test?

Because of the short timescale in which to deliver the flu vaccination programme across all primary schools in Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that some vaccine sessions will have to be held around the time of the transfer test. The side effects of the vaccination are minor or not noticeable in most children and as this is the seventh year that children are being offered the vaccine, most parents of P7 children

will consent to their child being immunised regardless of the date of the session. Having the vaccine each year will reduce their chance of becoming unwell with influenza.

It is only the child's parent/guardian who can consent or withdraw consent for vaccination if the session is held around the time of the transfer test. We would advise against schools drawing up their own withdrawal forms, as this is a parental decision.

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.

What happens if a child has not received a consent form?

Every child should be offered the chance to receive the influenza vaccine. If they have not been provided with a consent form, for example they moved to the school after the class lists were created, please inform your school nurse as soon as possible so they can send a consent form to the school.

Can schools share children's personal data with school nursing teams under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)?

Yes. School-based immunisation services are vitally important to improving children's health and supporting their educational development and attainment. The data sharing required for school-based immunisation services is therefore in the public interest. The Education Authority has shared a template Privacy Notice for schools to use on their website (<https://www.eani.org.uk/about-us/privacy/ea-think-data-online-resource-hub/templates-and-guides>), which explains to parents and pupils who their information may be shared with and this Privacy Notice highlights that information may be shared with Health & Social Care Trusts.

If you have further queries please speak to your designated Education Authority Data Protection Officer for advice.

What else can schools do to provide information to parents about the programme?

Schools now often have websites, parent newsletters and email/text contact with parents, which can all be used as ways to provide information to parents about the programme and/or to encourage them to return the consent forms in a timely way back to school. Schools have a key role in promoting uptake of the flu vaccination programme through the relationship that you have with parents. This year we would like a concerted effort to increase it substantially as we need to reduce the impact of flu on the health and social care. Suggested text for a newsletter/website is given overleaf, which can be adapted as appropriate:

Flu Immunisation Programme

The School Health Team will be visiting the school on *..insert date...* for the flu immunisation programme. Consent forms *have been/are being* given out to children and need to be completed and returned to school by *...insert date...*

The programme has been introduced to give protection to children against flu, which can be a very unpleasant illness and can mean that they have to take time off school. It will also help to stop the spread of flu and so will protect people around them as well. The vaccine is usually given to children by a simple spray into their nose and they can return to their lessons very quickly afterwards. Having read the leaflet provided, you can contact the school health team if you have any further questions on *...insert phone number....*

Information about the programme and leaflets in other languages can be found at:
<http://www.fluawareni.info>

A short video aimed at children explaining the programme has been developed by the Public Health Agency and can be found on the following link: **PHA will provide this link when finalised**

You may find it helpful to post it on your website or show it to the children in advance of the school health teams visiting the school.

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 2020

Developing a timeline will help the programme run smoothly and efficiently

Month	Action
May - June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Health Agency (PHA) Letter to Education Authority • PHA Letter to Principals • A member of school nursing team will contact school to begin partnership planning • Schools to identify key staff
Mid to 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 • School to move computerised class list up each year at the end of June to ensure that class lists are accurate for school health
August to Mid-September	<ul 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) • Due to the electronic school roll, it is anticipated that schools will not need to provide whole school 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 to put information in newsletter/website about the programme • Schools can assist by ensuring consent envelopes are returned within one week via school parent texting service/reminders • Schools to oversee return of parental consent envelopes and returns organised by class in unopened envelopes • 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