

## Flu Vaccination and Mental Illness

### An important message for people with severe mental illness and carers

If you are living with a mental illness or are a carer of someone with a mental illness including acting as a Personal Assistant, you might be eligible for a free flu vaccination offered by the NHS.

The flu vaccine is safe and effective. It's offered every year on the NHS to help protect people at risk of flu and especially important with the dual risk of COVID-19 this year.

The NHS says that the best time to have the flu vaccine is in the autumn before flu starts spreading but if you are unable to get it in the autumn, it is still helpful to get it later.

**Below is the list of people who are entitled to get a flu vaccine for free. This includes:**

- People aged 50 and over and people who will be 50 by 31 March 2021
- Pregnant women
- People in long-stay residential care
- Frontline health or social care workers
- People who receive a carer's allowance, or are the main carer for an older or disabled person who may be at risk if they get sick
- People who live with someone [who's at high risk from COVID-19](#) (on the NHS shielded patient list)



It also includes people with a number of long-term health conditions. The NHS lists these as including:

- respiratory conditions, such as [asthma](#) (needing steroid inhaler or tablets), [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease](#) (COPD), including emphysema and [bronchitis](#)
- [diabetes](#)
- heart conditions, such as [coronary heart disease](#) or [heart failure](#)
- being very overweight – a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or above
- [chronic kidney disease](#)
- liver disease, such as [hepatitis](#)
- neurological conditions, such as [Parkinson's disease](#), [motor neurone disease](#), [multiple sclerosis \(MS\)](#), or [cerebral palsy](#)
- [a learning disability](#)
- problems with your spleen, for example, [sickle cell disease](#), or if you have had your spleen removed
- a weakened immune system as the result of conditions such as [HIV and AIDS](#), or taking medicines such as [steroid tablets](#) or [chemotherapy](#)



If you are not on this list, you can still have the vaccination through most pharmacies, but at a cost. If you're not sure, ask your GP surgery to find out if you can get a free flu jab this year.

## Top tips for people with severe mental illness, carers and practitioners and health care workers

**If you have a severe mental illness or care for someone with a severe mental illness these are some things to be aware of:**

The NHS advises that getting a flu vaccination is especially important for anyone over the age of 50 who has any of the above long-term conditions.

If you're in any of these groups, you can get your flu vaccine for free at your GP surgery or most pharmacies. This will be done in a way that is safe.

Flu vaccination is important. It saves lives. That is especially the case this year, as getting flu and COVID-19 at the same time means you are more likely to be seriously ill.

If you have concerns about the vaccination, your GP surgery (General Practitioner) or pharmacist should be able to discuss your concerns with you.

Speak to your GP surgery about the support that would help you in having your vaccination and physical health check.

When booking your vaccination with the practice it might be worth combining the appointment with your physical health check if you have not yet had it this year.

**If you're eligible to get your flu jab, it's your right to have it. And no one should miss out on this vital vaccination because of their mental health.**



*'If the vaccination was explained to me, I could see it helping my fears.'*  
Expert by Experience

**Your practice team and local pharmacy will be considering the following:**

... the method of communication you'd prefer: text, phone calls, or a letter and will let you know if you're eligible for a vaccine.

...that you may have some fears about vaccination and they will be happy to make adaptations to help meet your needs.

...that you may need extra support to attend. This might include help with physical access or support with phobias or anxieties.

...offering to complete your comprehensive physical health check at the same time as you are receiving your flu vaccination. If you are having your vaccine in your local pharmacy they may also suggest you contact your local practice directly to arrange a health check.

**No one should miss out on basic health care because of a mental illness. Too many people do. This year more than ever it's vital to reach out to everyone who is eligible for their flu jab.**



*'I try to combine appointments where possible and provide tailored support for the individual.'* Clinician



*'When in hospital I noticed staff receiving the vaccination so I enquired if I could also have one, it was only then that it was offered.'*  
Expert by Experience

## Commonly asked questions

### What is the flu and how does the vaccination work?

The flu is a very common illness caused by a virus. For most it can result in 2-3 days in bed but for high risk groups it can be dangerous and more severe. An average of 11,000 people die from flu in England each year. Adults with chronic respiratory conditions (conditions that affect the lungs and breathing) are more likely to die if they catch flu compared to healthy adults, as are people with cardiovascular disease (conditions affecting the heart or blood vessels). The flu vaccine gives the best protection against some strains of flu virus training your immune system to fight the flu. After your jab, it usually takes around two weeks to be protected against flu.

### How can I get the flu vaccination?

If you are entitled to a free vaccination you will be able to get it through your GP or possibly your pharmacy. If you work in the NHS you will be able to get it at work, some other employers also offer it. If you are not entitled to the free vaccination you can purchase it through most pharmacies. If you are pregnant speak to your midwife about receiving the vaccination.

### What if the flu vaccination has run out at the GP/Pharmacy?

Speak to your local practice team to find out when it will be back in stock and ask if it would be possible to contact you once it is back. If you have any anxieties about stock levels speak to either your GP surgery or Pharmacy so they can support you.

### Is it safe to visit my pharmacy or GP practice during COVID-19?

GP practices will be safe places to visit. There are measures in place to protect patients and staff. If you are concerned about getting COVID-19, it might be good to ring them before hand to discuss what measures they have in place. If you are visiting a pharmacy for your vaccine, they may be able to suggest a quieter time of the day for this.

### Are there any side effects?

Most people will not experience any side effects. If you do, these side effects are mild and only last for a day or so, such as:

- slightly raised temperature
- muscle aches
- a sore, 'heavy' arm where the needle went in – this is more likely to happen with the vaccine for people aged 65 and over

You can visit [NHS.co.uk](https://www.nhs.uk) for more information which includes information in other languages and an audio guide. We recommend only visiting trusted sites for information on the vaccination.

**This resource has been created with input from the Equally Well UK Expert by Experience and Clinical group and supported by NHS England and Improvement, Public Health England and Mind.**