



HM Government



BOOST YOUR IMMUNITY THIS WINTER

**WITH YOUR FLU VACCINE
+ COVID-19 BOOSTER**

Answers to frequently asked questions about over 50s and at-risk groups who are eligible for the vaccines.

This autumn and winter, health experts have warned we could have a bad flu season, alongside rising cases of COVID-19.

Flu and COVID-19 can both be life-threatening and spread more easily in winter when we are more likely to be indoors or in crowded spaces.

It's easy to pass on COVID-19 or flu without knowing. Even if you are healthy, you can still catch COVID-19 or flu and spread it to others. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself and those around you.

Who is eligible for the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine is given free on the NHS to people who:

- are 50 and over (including those who'll be 50 by 31 March 2022)
- have certain health conditions
- are pregnant
- are in long-stay residential care
- receive a carer's allowance, or are the main carer for an older or disabled person who may be at-risk if you get sick
- live with someone who is more likely to get infections (such as someone who has HIV, has had a transplant or is having certain treatments for cancer, lupus or rheumatoid arthritis)
- are frontline health or social care workers

Why should you get the flu vaccine?

More than 11,000 people die from flu in an average year.

This winter, health experts have warned we could see high levels of flu circulating. We could also be less immune to flu viruses as there were fewer cases last winter due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Being healthy doesn't reduce your risk of getting flu or passing it on. You can have flu without any symptoms and pass it on to family and friends, many of whom may be at increased risk from flu.

How effective is the flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine will help prevent you from getting flu and is your best protection against the virus. If you do get flu after vaccination, it's likely your symptoms will be milder and shorter-lived than they would otherwise have been.

What are the side effects of the flu vaccine?

You may get a slight temperature, and your arm may feel a bit sore where you have the injection. Other reactions are rare.

I had the flu vaccine last year. Do I need to have it again?

Yes. The viruses which cause flu can change every year, which means flu (and the flu vaccine) this year may be different from last year.

I'm pregnant or breastfeeding – should I get the flu vaccine?

Pregnancy puts extra demands on your body and can reduce your ability to fight off flu. Flu infection increases the chances of pregnant women and their babies needing intensive care. So if you're pregnant, you should have the flu vaccine to help protect you and your baby. It's safe to have the flu vaccine at any stage of pregnancy, from conception onwards. It's also safe for women who are breastfeeding to have the vaccine.

Is there anyone who shouldn't have the flu vaccine?

Most adults can have the flu vaccine, but you should avoid it if you've had a serious allergic reaction to a flu vaccine in the past.

You may be at-risk of an allergic reaction to the flu vaccine injection if you have an egg allergy. This is because some flu vaccines are made using eggs. Ask your GP practice or pharmacy for information on getting a low-egg or egg-free vaccine.

If you're ill with a high temperature, it's best to wait until you're better before having the flu vaccine.

How long does the flu vaccine take to become effective?

It takes the immune response about two weeks to fully develop after vaccination.

Can the flu vaccine cause flu?

There are several types of injected flu vaccine. None of them contain live viruses so they cannot give you flu.

Why is it particularly important to get the flu vaccine this year?

If you catch flu and COVID-19 at the same time, research shows you're more likely to be seriously ill.

Both viruses spread more easily in winter when we are more likely to be indoors or in crowded spaces and they can both be life-threatening.

How do I get my flu vaccine?

Those eligible for the free flu vaccine should come forward to get it as soon as possible. You can have the NHS flu vaccine at:

- a pharmacy offering the service
- a GP surgery
- a midwifery service if you're pregnant

You might also be offered it when attending a hospital appointment.

If you have your flu vaccine as part of a NHS service somewhere other than your GP surgery, you do not have to tell the surgery. This will be done for you.

Who is eligible for the COVID-19 booster?

Booster vaccine doses will be available on the NHS for people most at-risk from COVID-19 who have had a 2nd dose of a vaccine at least six months* ago. This includes:

- people aged 50 and over
- people who live or work in care homes
- frontline health and social care workers
- people aged 16 and over with a health condition that puts them at high-risk of getting seriously ill from COVID-19
- carers aged 16 and over
- people aged 16 and over who live with someone who is more likely to get infections (such as someone who has HIV, has had a transplant or is having certain treatments for cancer, lupus or rheumatoid arthritis)

People who are pregnant and in one of the eligible groups can also get a booster dose.

How and when will I receive my COVID-19 booster?

You will be offered your booster vaccine no earlier than six months* after your second COVID-19 vaccination. Most people can:

- wait to be contacted by a local NHS service such as a GP surgery and book an appointment with them

- go to a walk-in vaccination site to get vaccinated without needing an appointment
- book a vaccination appointment online for an appointment at a vaccination centre or pharmacy

Booking online

You can book your COVID-19 booster dose online if it's been five months (152 days) since you had your 2nd dose and you are:

- aged 50 and over
- aged 16 and over with a health condition that puts you at high risk from COVID-19

You'll be offered appointment dates from six months after the date of your 2nd dose.

*For operational reasons, administration may be brought forward to a minimum of five months in certain circumstances including:

- in a care home setting to enable all residents to be vaccinated in the same session
- where an otherwise eligible individual attends for another reason (for example to receive influenza vaccine)
- For those about to receive immunosuppressive treatment where the booster may be brought forward to a minimum of four months (~120 days) to avoid giving the booster when the immune system is less able to respond.

Why should you get the COVID-19 booster?

The COVID-19 vaccination will reduce the chance of you suffering from COVID-19. The vaccines have already saved more than 130,000 lives and significantly reduced hospitalisations from COVID-19. Booster doses are an important way of keeping the virus under control longer term and will help protect the most vulnerable through these winter months.

With both flu and COVID-19 expected to be circulating this winter, it's important to boost your immunity and help protect yourself and others.

Will my COVID-19 booster be from the same manufacturer as the original COVID-19 vaccine I had?

You will be given a booster dose of either Pfizer/BioNTech or Moderna vaccine. AstraZeneca may be an option if this is the vaccine that you had for the first two doses.

These vaccines have already been taken up by millions of people in the UK. You will be offered the right vaccine for you which may be the same or different from the vaccines that you had before.

Why do I need a COVID-19 booster, when I have had two COVID-19 vaccines already?

The Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisations (JCVI) has advised booster vaccinations as a precaution, to help extend the protection you gained from your first two doses and give you longer term protection through the winter months.

What are the side effects of the COVID-19 booster?

As with your previous dose, the common side effects are the same for all COVID-19 vaccines used in the UK and include:

- having a painful, heavy feeling and tenderness in the arm where you had your injection – this tends to be worst around 1 to 2 days after the vaccine
- feeling tired
- headache
- general aches or mild flu-like symptoms

You can rest and take paracetamol (follow the dose advice in the packaging) to help make you feel better. Although feeling feverish is not uncommon for 2 to 3 days, a high temperature is unusual and may indicate you have COVID-19 or another infection.

Are there any serious side effects to having the COVID-19 vaccine?

Worldwide, there have been recent, very rare cases of inflammation of the heart called myocarditis or pericarditis reported after Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines. These cases have been seen mostly in younger men within several days after vaccination. Most of these people recovered and felt better following rest and simple treatments.

You should seek medical advice urgently if, after vaccination, you experience:

- chest pain
- shortness of breath
- feelings of having a fast-beating, fluttering or pounding heart

Is there anyone within the eligible groups who shouldn't have a COVID-19 booster?

There are very few people who should not have a booster. If you had serious side effects after any previous dose you may be advised to avoid or delay further vaccination. You should discuss this with your doctor or specialist.

Is the COVID-19 booster different to a third primary dose that certain people should have?

Yes. A third primary dose is being given to bring severely immunosuppressed individuals up nearer to the same level of immunity as the non-immunosuppressed achieve from two doses, whereas the COVID-19 booster is to maintain the highest levels of protection.

Severely immunosuppressed individuals will become eligible for a booster dose as part of a routine booster programme from around six months after their third primary dose, pending further advice.

I'm pregnant or breastfeeding – can I get the COVID-19 booster?

Pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers who are in a high-risk group for COVID-19 can get the booster. If you have any questions you can discuss having the booster with your GP practice or maternity team.

Has the COVID-19 booster been given to people like me?

The booster vaccines have been given to tens of thousands of adults, including people from different ethnic backgrounds, age groups and with underlying health conditions.

I've had COVID-19 already. Do I need to get the booster?

Yes. Getting vaccinated is just as important for those who have already had COVID-19 as it is for those who haven't. As with all new viruses, we don't yet know how long those who have recovered from COVID-19 are immune for, or the level of their immunity. Being vaccinated will help protect you from becoming seriously ill from COVID-19 in the future.

Will I get the COVID-19 booster at the same time as my flu vaccine?

The JCVI has advised that the flu vaccine and COVID-19 booster vaccine can be given at the same time. However, you may be offered both vaccines at the same time, or separately. If you are offered either vaccine, get them as soon as possible. Do not wait to try and schedule both vaccinations at the same time as this may not be possible and could delay your protection for the winter ahead.



Get vaccinated. Get boosted. Get protected.

For more information visit
nhs.uk/wintervaccinations