

BOOST YOUR IMMUNITY THIS WINTER

FLU + COVID-19 BOOSTER VACCINES

Answers to frequently asked questions about the seasonal flu vaccine and autumn COVID-19 booster.

GET BOOSTED. GET PROTECTED.

nhs.uk/wintervaccinations

Flu and COVID-19 can both cause serious illness and spread more easily when people tend to mix indoors more during winter. Health experts are warning of a potentially bad flu season alongside a projected wave of COVID-19 cases.

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

Flu vaccine questions

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 a severe infection due to a weakened immune system, such as someone living with HIV, someone who has had a transplant, or is having certain treatments for cancer, lupus or rheumatoid arthritis
- are frontline health or social care workers who cannot get the vaccine through an occupational health scheme at work
- all children aged 2 or 3 years on 31 August 2022
- all primary school aged children
- some secondary school aged children.

Why should you get the flu vaccine?

It's important that you get your flu vaccination this year to help protect yourself and those around you. Flu is an unpredictable virus that can kill thousands.

There have been very low levels of flu circulating in the last two years due to measures that were in place to reduce COVID-19 infections, such as social distancing and mask-wearing, meaning fewer people will have built up natural immunity to flu. There is likely to be a resurgence of flu this winter similar to, or higher than the levels before the pandemic because people will be mixing more so it is more important than ever to get your free flu vaccine.

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 is your best protection against the virus and if you get flu after vaccination, the disease will be milder and shorter-lived than it would otherwise have been. It takes the immune response about two weeks to fully develop after vaccination.

What are the side effects of the flu vaccine?

Flu vaccines have a good safety record. All adult flu vaccines are given by injection into the muscle of the upper arm. Most side effects are mild and only last for a day or so, such as:

- slightly raised temperature
- muscle aches
- sore arm where the needle went in – this is more likely to happen with one of the vaccines for people aged 65 and over.

Try these tips to help reduce the discomfort:

- continue to move your arm regularly
- take a painkiller, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen – some people, including those who are pregnant, should not take ibuprofen unless a doctor recommends it.

Do I need to have it again?

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

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

JCVI advice recommends that you should have a flu vaccine if you are eligible. 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 the first few weeks up to your expected due date. Women who have had the flu vaccine while pregnant also pass some protection on to their babies, which lasts for the first few months of their lives. It's also safe for women who are breastfeeding to have the vaccine (although you will only be eligible if you have a long-term health condition).

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 or have a condition that weakens your immune system. This is because some flu vaccines are made using eggs. Ask your GP practice or pharmacy about 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?

No. The injected vaccine used for adults does not contain any live viruses, so it cannot cause flu. Some people get a slightly raised temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, and you may feel sore at the injection site.

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 cause serious illness.

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 if you're over 18
- a GP surgery
- you may be able to get it through your maternity service if you're pregnant
- school or community clinics for school aged children.

For the first time, some people who are eligible for a flu vaccine will be able to book an appointment at a pharmacy online under a new trial for a [flu national booking system](#).

COVID-19 seasonal vaccination questions

Who is eligible for the COVID-19 autumn booster?

Seasonal booster vaccines will be available on the NHS for people most at-risk from COVID-19 who have had their last booster dose at least three months ago. This includes people who are:

- aged 50 years and over
- pregnant
- aged 5 and over and at high risk due to a health condition
- aged 5 and over and at high risk because of a weakened immune system
- aged 5 and over and live with someone who has a weakened immune system
- aged 16 and over and a carer, either paid or unpaid
- living or working in a care home for older people
- frontline health and social care workers.

How will people be invited for their booster vaccination?

- Most eligible people should receive a COVID-19 vaccination invitation from the NHS, by SMS, email or letter. If you think you or your child need this vaccine because of a weakened immune system or underlying health condition, please book an appointment at www.nhs.uk/covid-vaccination or by calling 119, answering 'yes' or 'I think I might be' when asked if you are at high risk from COVID-19, then discuss this with a healthcare professional at your appointment.
- You may also be invited to come forward by your GP surgery.

How will those eligible receive their COVID-19 autumn booster dose?

- Vaccinations will take place in one of thousands of sites across England, such as in local GP surgeries and community pharmacies as well as some acute hospitals and vaccination centres.
- When invited, please make an appointment at the earliest opportunity. As well as finding a convenient location via the National Booking System or by calling 119, those eligible can also visit vaccination walk-in clinics where locally available.

Why should you get the COVID-19 autumn booster?

- The COVID-19 vaccination programme has saved countless lives and allowed us to live with this virus without restrictions on our freedoms.
- Immunity from previous COVID-19 vaccine doses decreases over time, which means you need to 'top it up'.
- Viruses like COVID-19 spread much more easily in winter when we tend to mix indoors more, so it's important everyone eligible tops up their protection with a booster.

Why do I need a COVID-19 booster when I have already had a COVID-19 vaccine?

Even if you've already had one, two or more doses of the vaccine (depending on your eligibility), and perhaps had COVID-19 too, your immunity can decrease over time so you may still need an autumn booster to strengthen your protection. The Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisations (JCVI) has advised booster vaccinations as a precaution, to help extend the protection you gained from your previous doses and give you longer term protection through the winter months.

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

You will be offered the right vaccine for you which may be the same or different from the vaccines that you had before. When you attend your booster vaccination appointment, the NHS will offer you a safe, effective vaccine. If you have any concerns, discuss with your GP or healthcare professional.

What are COVID-19 bivalent booster vaccines?

COVID-19 vaccines that target two different variants of COVID-19 are called bivalent vaccines. Bivalent vaccines broaden immunity and therefore potentially improve protection against variants of COVID-19. All vaccines used in the UK to date have been primarily targeted at the original strain of COVID-19 and have remained effective at preventing severe disease against subsequent variants.

How do we know the COVID-19 bivalent vaccines are safe?

- All vaccines used in the UK are authorised by our independent medicines' regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).
- Each COVID-19 vaccine candidate is assessed by teams of scientists and clinicians on a case-by-case basis and is only authorised once it has met robust standards of effectiveness, safety and quality set by the MHRA.
- The MHRA has reviewed the available safety and efficacy data supporting bivalent vaccines and provided their authorisation.

Can I still get an AstraZeneca vaccine?

AstraZeneca has now fulfilled its obligations and completed its COVID-19 vaccine supply agreement with the UK government. The Novavax COVID-19 vaccine Nuvaxovid, a protein subunit vaccine, will therefore be used as an alternative for people who are contraindicated against and cannot have any alternative clinically suitable UK-approved COVID-19 vaccine as per JCVI advice, including the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna.

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

As with your previous doses, 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?

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.

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

- Women who are pregnant are considered to be at greater risk of severe illness due to COVID-19 infection. Most pregnant women admitted to hospital with COVID-19 are unvaccinated.
- The best way to protect against the known risks of COVID-19 in pregnancy for both women and babies, including admissions of women to intensive care and in cases of premature birth of the baby, is through vaccination.
- Unvaccinated or partially vaccinated women who become pregnant are strongly encouraged to come forward for vaccination, and women who are pregnant and have previously been vaccinated should be offered a booster dose.

Is the COVID-19 booster safe for pregnant women?

All vaccines must go through the same regulatory approval process as any medicines to ensure they meet strict safety standards and offer high levels of protection. There is now extensive experience nationally and internationally of the safety of the COVID-19 and flu vaccines recommended for pregnant women in the UK. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect women from serious complications from COVID-19 and flu in pregnancy – that can harm both the women and their baby. If you are pregnant, we strongly encourage you to take up the offer of vaccination. The flu vaccine helps to boost your immunity and helps pass protection on to your baby.

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

The booster vaccines have been given to millions of people, 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?

If you are eligible, 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?

For those eligible to have both a COVID-19 booster and a flu jab this year, you may be offered the choice to have both vaccines at the same time. However, most appointments for each vaccine are likely to be separate and we would recommend that people get their vaccinations as soon as possible and help get protected as early as they can rather than waiting.

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For more information visit
nhs.uk/wintervaccinations