

Dear Reader,

The number of people presenting to general practice and hospital Accident and Emergency Departments continues to increase significantly week by week. In addition to this, the strain of Flu this year is more severe than normal, this means that the number of people who are catching it is greater than most years, the symptoms are more severe and the complications such as chest infections, pneumonia and even rarely fatalities are more common than an average year.

General Practice will have limited stocks of Flu Vaccine left and we are being asked by the Medical Director of the NHS to use these stocks to vaccinate the eligible patients within the next two weeks. Those who are most at risk and therefore in the eligible groups include:

All those who are aged 65 or over

- People with Diabetes
- Respiratory disease - those with asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- People with chronic kidney disease
- Heart disease and strokes - those who have heart failure, had an heart attack or have suffered a stroke.
- Pregnant women
- Carers

It is alarming that over 3 million people in England in these at risk groups have not yet been vaccinated yet could clearly benefit from vaccination. The Flu vaccination is easy to administer and has few side effects, some have a slightly sore arm for a couple of days and occasionally feel slightly rough for a day or two but the benefits far outweigh risks. As a GP, I offer Flu vaccinations to patients in my practice who are in the at risk groups. Those who decline, which is their right, often give the same reasons:

- When I had it before I caught flu from it.
- The vaccine is made from inactivated virus and therefore cannot transmit the virus .
- I have had the flu jab but have still got flu so clearly it does not work.

The vaccine does prevent the majority of people from catching flu, but some may catch it but it is then often a milder infection and the symptoms last for a shorter period of time and may have less serious complications. Around this time of year there are many viral upper respiratory infections that are not flu and some people who believe their flu vaccination has not worked mistakenly believe that the viral upper respiratory infection was flu.

The flu virus mutates and therefore we offer a new vaccine each year. This is manufactured based on the expected strain of influenza. We have a clear idea from closely following events in the Southern Hemisphere (especially Australia) because what the strains they have seen during their winter will almost certainly be the ones we get a few months later in our winter. For fit healthy people flu can be a nasty infection with a number of people getting complications and occasional fatalities. At its worse it can be devastating, more people died in the world in 1918 of Spanish flu than died in battle during the whole of the first world war. For those in the at risk groups the risk of complications is far greater.

Flu vaccine is the best protection we have against an unpredictable virus that can cause unpleasant illness in children and severe illness and death among at-risk groups, including older people, pregnant women and those with an underlying medical health condition. I would urge people who fall in the at risk groups to contact their surgery (preferably after 11 am Monday to Friday) to book an appointment for a flu before it is too late and stocks have run out.

Dr. Nigel Watson