

PRESS RELEASE

Those aged 65 or over in Wales are urged to protect themselves against flu

People aged 65 or over are being advised to get vaccinated against influenza ('flu') soon for best protection this winter.

Flu can be very serious for older people, and the annual 'Beat Flu' immunisation programme is now underway throughout Wales, encouraging individuals most at risk of serious complications from flu to get protected with a free flu vaccination. As well as older people this also includes pregnant women and those with certain long term health conditions as these groups are at high risk of complications if they catch flu. Older people, and the carers of those whose health may be at risk if the carer becomes ill, are being advised about the dangers of flu with a clear message from Public Health Wales to "Beat flu before it beats you!"

Last year in Wales around a third of the people in Wales aged 65 and over missed out on getting their flu vaccine.

Ian Thomas, Chief Executive of the older people's charity Age Cymru, said: "As part of our annual Spread the Warmth campaign, we'd like to urge people who are aged 65 or over and others in 'at-risk' groups, to take up the opportunity to have their annual flu vaccination soon because flu comes around every winter and can be a serious and potentially debilitating illness, especially for older people.

"People who care for an older or disabled person should also have a flu vaccination, to help protect themselves as well as the people they are looking after.

"If you are aged 65 or over, or have a long-term health condition, you are more at risk of complications from flu than other people and it can also make any existing health condition worse. Flu can even lead to a hospital stay.

"If you haven't had it yet this winter, then make sure you get the flu vaccination soon – the virus changes every year, so you also need to get a flu jab every year. This should be part of your annual getting ready for winter routine if you are aged 65 or over, or in an 'at-risk' group."

Annual flu immunisation is the single best way to protect against catching or spreading flu. It is available to people in eligible groups free of charge via their GP surgery, and also at many community pharmacies. Dr Richard Roberts, Head of the Vaccine Preventable Diseases Programme at Public Health Wales, said, "We would urge everyone aged 65 or over, pregnant women, and those who are in an 'at risk' groups to beat flu by having their flu vaccine soon. For most people influenza (or 'flu') is usually a relatively minor, albeit unpleasant and inconvenient, illness. But every year vulnerable people can, and do, die from flu and its many complications."

Dr Roberts added "Annual flu immunisation is the best way to protect against catching or spreading this illness, so don't miss out- if you haven't had your flu vaccine yet this winter it's important you get your vaccine as soon as possible."

The flu virus spreads easily via droplets which are sprayed into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Direct contact with contaminated hands or surfaces can also spread infection. It can spread rapidly, especially in closed communities such as hospitals, residential homes and schools.

If in doubt as to whether you are in a risk group, check with your GP surgery or community pharmacy, or you can check online at www.beatflu.org.

All children aged two and three on 31 August 2016 are also being offered protection with a nasal spray flu vaccine at their GP surgery, and children aged four to seven years old are being offered the vaccine at school.

CASE STUDY – 65 and over

Fighting flu

Retired business owner John Brown is ensuring he gets protected against flu this year by getting his flu vaccination.

The annual influenza (flu) vaccine is free of charge for everyone aged 65 or over, and Mr Brown believes it is really important not to miss out on this protection:

“I have the flu vaccination every year and I’m convinced it works for me. “The flu jab is so easy too, I pop along to my surgery each year and it only takes 5 minutes. . I would recommend it to everyone. In my younger days I had a bad case of the flu and felt dreadful, I never want it again – I don’t think people realise how serious it can be. Now I am in my older years it is even more important to be protected. I recommend it to all older people!”

John feels so strongly about flu vaccine that he has even appeared in a short film to promote the importance of having the jab (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wrsfecWozw>).

Like many older people I spend a lot of time with my young grandchildren, and getting the vaccine helps reduce the chances of me spreading flu to them too. It’s also great that some of them are eligible for the nasal spray flu vaccine this year too.

“I encourage everyone who is eligible for the free flu vaccination to book an appointment with your local surgery today – it takes a minute, lasts all year and has the potential to be a life-saver.”

Health experts recommend that those with caring responsibilities for older people should also be vaccinated to help protect them and the person in their care.

Annual flu vaccination is recommended for some groups of people. This may be because of increased personal risk of severe complications due to a medical condition (such as heart, lung, liver or kidney problems), pregnancy or age.

Children aged 2 years and over can have a ‘no needle’ nasal spray flu vaccine. Children aged 2 and 3 get their vaccine at their GP surgery and those in primary school in reception class and years 1, 2 and 3 get it at school.

For a full list of eligible groups, please visit beatflu.org.uk.