Protecting children at increased risk from flu
Why is my child being offered a flu vaccine?

If your child is already suffering from another illness then catching flu can be serious. Your child may not be able to fight off flu as effectively as other children. It could also make their existing condition worse.

These conditions include:

- serious breathing problems, for example, severe asthma needing regular inhaled or oral steroids;
- serious heart conditions;
- severe kidney disease;
- diabetes that needs medication;
- immunosuppression due to disease or treatment, for example, chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment for cancer or long-term steroid use; and
- problems with the spleen, either because the spleen has been removed (asplenia) or doesn’t work properly, for example, sickle cell disease.

If you are not sure whether your child needs a flu vaccine or need more advice, speak to your practice nurse, GP or health visitor.
What is flu?

Flu is an illness caused by influenza viruses. It is most common during the winter months. People often describe colds as flu, but the symptoms of flu come on very suddenly and are different from and much more severe than the symptoms of colds. Flu symptoms are:

- a high fever;
- a shivery feeling;
- a headache;
- an aching body; and
- extreme tiredness.

A dry cough, sore throat and stuffy nose are also common with flu.

How is flu spread?

Flu is highly infectious. It spreads very quickly by coughs, sneezes and touching people who are already carrying the virus. Touching objects such as toys that have been coughed or sneezed on can also pass it on to other people.
How will flu affect my child?
Flu lasts for about a week, during which time your child will be off their food, may feel very unwell and want to stay in bed. Even after the infection has gone, it may take much longer for your child to fully recover. Flu can also be followed by other infections, such as pneumonia, bronchitis, ear infections (otitis media) and sinusitis.

What is the flu vaccine?
The flu vaccine protects against those types of flu virus that your child is most likely to come across each winter. Different flu viruses are around each winter, so a new vaccine has to be produced each year. The vaccine protects against flu but not against other respiratory infections such as the common cold.

Can the flu vaccine cause flu?
As the vaccine viruses are inactivated (killed), they cannot cause flu.
When should my child have the flu vaccine?

Children can have the flu vaccine from six months of age. The best time to have the vaccine is between September and early November so that your child is protected before flu starts circulating. If your child is having the flu vaccine for the first time, they will need two doses about one month apart.

How effective is the vaccine?

The vaccine normally gives good protection. However, in some cases, a child's existing illness may reduce its effectiveness. It should still help to make the flu less serious though.

Will my child have to have flu vaccine every year?

Yes. The viruses that cause flu change every year, which means the flu vaccine has to change as well. So, your child will need to be immunised each year before the new flu viruses start circulating in the winter.
How soon does the vaccine start to work and how long will protection last?

The flu vaccine may take up to 10 to 14 days to reach full protection. Protection lasts for about one year.

Are there any side effects from the vaccine?

Your child may get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days following immunisation as their immune system responds to the vaccine. Their arm may be a bit sore for a day or two where the injection was given. Other side effects are rare.

Can children who are allergic to eggs have the flu vaccine?

Flu vaccines are prepared in hens' eggs so they should not be given to anyone with a known anaphylactic hypersensitivity (a severe allergic reaction that needs urgent medical attention) to egg products. Ask your doctor if you are not sure.