Protecting health and social care workers from flu
Why immunise health and social care workers?

Immunising health and social care workers aims to reduce the spread of influenza (flu) in health and social care premises.

This helps to:
- protect patients and service users, including vulnerable patients who may not respond well to their own immunisation;
- protect other health and social care staff; and
- make sure health and social care services are effective and efficient.

Who should have the vaccine?

All health and social care staff who are directly involved in caring for patients in:
- general practice;
- NHS hospitals;
- private hospitals; and
- residential care homes.

This includes:
- medical staff;
- nurses;
- ambulance drivers; and
- care staff.
It does not include people working on wards or in general practice who are not directly involved in patient care, such as cleaners or catering staff. However, in some cases, an employer may offer the vaccine to these staff.

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. A dry cough, sore throat and stuffy nose are common symptoms of both colds and flu. However, the symptoms of flu come on suddenly and are different from and much more severe than colds. These symptoms include:

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

Most people recover completely from flu within a week or two, but for some people it can be more serious.
Who is most at risk from flu?
Anyone can get flu but it is more serious for older people and people with a chronic medical condition, particularly heart or chest disease. Flu can lead to complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia, and may be life-threatening for people who are already ill.

What is the flu vaccine?
The flu vaccine contains parts of two types of influenza A and one type of influenza B viruses. Because flu viruses are continually changing, and different types are around each winter, a new vaccine has to be produced each year.

Can the flu vaccine cause flu?
The viruses in the vaccine are inactivated (killed) and cannot cause flu. Some people may experience mild flu-like symptoms for up to 48 hours as their immune system responds to the vaccine but this is not flu.
When should I have the flu vaccine?

The best time to have the vaccine is between September and early November before the main flu season.

Because the viruses that cause flu change each year and the vaccine has to match the change, you need to have the flu vaccine every year.

Should I expect a reaction to the immunisation?

After immunisation you may get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days. Your arm may be a bit sore for a day or two where you had the injection.

How effective is the vaccine?

The current flu vaccines give 70% to 80% protection against infection with influenza viruses closely matching those in the vaccine.
How long does the protection last?
It takes about 10 to 14 days for the vaccine to work and for antibodies to reach protective levels. After this, protection lasts for about one year.

Is there anybody who can’t have the flu vaccine?
The flu vaccine should not be given to those who have had an anaphylactic reaction (a severe allergic reaction that needs urgent medical attention) to a previous dose of flu vaccine or any part of the vaccine (including neomycin, kanamycin and gentamicin – antibiotics which may be present in tiny amounts).

Flu vaccines are prepared in hens' eggs so they should not be given to anyone with a known serious anaphylactic reaction to egg products.

If a person is ill with a fever, the immunisation should be delayed until they have recovered.
Can I have the vaccine if I am pregnant?

Yes. If you are pregnant you can have the flu vaccine. Some of the flu vaccines contain thiomersal (a mercury preservative). The thiomersal-free flu vaccines are as safe and effective as those containing thiomersal. If possible, you should have a thiomersal-free flu vaccine, but if this is not available you should have a vaccine containing thiomersal.

For more information on thiomersal, see the thiomersal factsheet at www.immunisation.nhs.uk

Where do I get the vaccine from?

You should contact your occupational health department for more information. If you work in primary healthcare or social care, you should contact your employer.

No matter where you are working, if you are already in an 'at-risk' group, your GP should contact you to offer you the vaccine.