

October 2017

Health chiefs are urging people in Kent to protect themselves and their families from the flu virus this winter.

Some people are more susceptible to the effects of this highly infectious disease. For them, it can increase the risk of developing more serious illnesses such as bronchitis and pneumonia, or can make existing conditions worse. In the worst cases, flu can result in a stay in hospital, or even death. Flu is caused by influenza viruses that infect the windpipe and lungs. And because it's caused by viruses and not bacteria, antibiotics won't treat it. If, however, there are complications from getting flu, antibiotics may be needed.

The most common symptoms of flu are fever, chills, headache, aches and pains in the joints and muscles, and extreme tiredness. A bad bout of flu can be much worse than a heavy cold. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, they spread the flu virus in tiny droplets of saliva over a wide area. These droplets can then be breathed in by other people or they can be picked up by touching surfaces where the droplets have landed. You can prevent the spread of the virus by covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, and you can wash your hands frequently or use hand gels to reduce the risk of picking up the virus. But the best way to avoid catching and spreading flu is by having the vaccination before the flu season starts.

It is not possible to predict fully the strains of flu that will circulate each year, and there is always a risk of a change in the virus. The most likely viruses that will cause flu each year are identified in advance of the flu season in the UK; and vaccines are then made to match them as closely as possible. [The vaccines](#) are given in the autumn ideally before flu starts circulating. Flu vaccines protect against the main three or four types of flu virus most likely to be circulating. It can affect anyone but if you also suffer with other health issues the effects of flu can make it worse, even if your existing condition is well managed and you normally feel well.

The free flu vaccine is available to anyone who is over the age of 65, pregnant; or has certain medical conditions. People receiving a carer's allowance, or are the main carer for an elderly or disabled person are also eligible.

This year children aged 2 and 3 years, or in school years Reception, one, two, three, and four are eligible for a child-friendly nasal spray flu vaccine.

Dr John Rodriguez, Public Health Screening and Immunisation lead for Kent and Medway said: "The flu virus is easily spread within communities. It can be very unpleasant; especially for pregnant women and anyone who suffers with another illness like diabetes, asthma, COPD, heart disease or kidney disease.

"People whose immunity is lowered due to disease or treatment, such as steroid medication or cancer treatment are also at increased risk and should have the flu vaccine as soon as possible. We are keen to ensure all people are vaccinated, but especially those who are at greater risk in the groups already mentioned.

"Every year we see people badly affected by flu and some people die. My message to you is to please take the time to protect yourselves."

“Certain groups in our community - particularly the young, the elderly and those with co-existing illness - are extremely vulnerable, and for some it can even prove fatal. Our health partners across Kent are already warning of potential major demands on their services this winter and we are fully behind the NHS ‘Stay Well This Winter’ campaign by strongly urging those who are eligible for the flu vaccine to get it now as clearly they will need it.”

Please note:-

1. The flu vaccine for each winter helps provide protection against the strains of flu that are likely to be present and may be different from last year's. For this reason we strongly recommend that even if patients were vaccinated last year, they should be vaccinated again this year. In addition protection from the flu vaccine may only last about six months so you should have the flu vaccine each flu season.
2. Many GP Practices hold large flu vaccination clinics. It is best to find out dates and times by checking on Practice websites or by telephoning the Practice direct.
3. Participating community pharmacies also offer a service for patients who are eligible for a FREE Flu Vaccine. If you have the vaccination in a pharmacy they will take your details and let your GP Practice know that you have had the vaccination.

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