

FACTSHEET FOR CITIZENS

Seasonal Influenza – Basic facts

This fact sheet offers basic information on what influenza is and how vaccines can help people in high-risk groups to reduce their chances of becoming seriously ill. It is intended for information purposes only, not as medical advice. If you need advice on your own personal health then you should consult a healthcare provider in your country.

In Europe, influenza occurs in regular winter epidemics, although the intensity of infection varies from year to year. Even though for most people an influenza virus infection is just an unpleasant experience, the disease has other important impacts on European society. Firstly, some people develop a more serious illness that kills them prematurely. It is estimated by ECDC that at least 40,000 people die each year from influenza in the European Union (EU). Secondly, there are significant costs to the health services of Europe in caring for those sick from influenza. Thirdly, there are significant economic impacts deriving from the large numbers of mild to moderate cases which result in time off work and the consequent losses to production.

Specific population groups are more at risk of becoming seriously affected by influenza, these are the 'high-risk groups' – older people (usually those over age 65 years, though that age differs a little from country to country in Europe) and those with chronic ill-health. For these high-risk groups, yearly vaccination in the autumn is recommended in most EU countries, in an approach known as 'selective vaccination', which reduces their risks of complications, severe disease and death.

Some basics on flu

Human influenza viruses reproduce and transmit easily from one human to another. They spread predominately by droplets when people cough and sneeze and by indirect contact from respiratory secretions getting onto hands, tissues, etc. Influenza symptoms usually comprise the following combination of systemic and respiratory symptoms, though not every sufferer will necessarily show all symptoms:

- fever or feverishness
- headache
- muscle pain
- runny nose
- sore throat
- dry cough
- a general feeling of ill-health

The more serious symptoms typically last for only a few days, but cough, sore throat and runny nose may last longer. Some people can be infected with the influenza virus but have no symptoms, or only very mild symptoms. Usually, though, influenza makes people quite ill and they take a week or so to fully recover. However, it should be realised that many other viruses, and some bacteria, can cause symptoms similar to influenza – so not everyone with 'flu like symptoms' actually has 'flu'. Unfortunately, in some countries it is traditional to call even mild illnesses 'flu', 'grippe' or a 'touch of flu'. This is not to be encouraged as it results in people thinking influenza is less significant than it really is.

Once you have been infected with a particular influenza virus you usually become immune to it. You can also acquire immunity by being vaccinated. However, the virus

circulating changes from year to year, so immunity tends to last only for one season. That is why people who are recommended to be immunised need to receive their injection every autumn.

The incubation time for influenza (the number of days from when you are exposed to the virus to developing symptoms) ranges from 1 to 5 days, but the average is 2 days. Influenza viruses are generally divided into three types: A, B and C, of which the two first are of more concern as they cause the most serious illnesses. In some cases the disease becomes more severe, especially if the patient was already ill with a chronic condition such as lung or heart disease – as it is often the case in the elderly – or when a second, usually bacterial, infection develops (for example pneumonias), which can be fatal.

Who should be vaccinated?

Although complications from flu can occur in anyone, they are far more common among the high-risk groups. A survey by ECDC in 2006 of EU and other EEA (Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein) Member States found that countries were recommending annual vaccination to the two largest groups which are highlighted by the World Health Organisation (WHO):

1. The elderly
2. People with chronic medical conditions, such as lung and heart disease, and people whose immune systems are weak

There are different approaches in the countries regarding the groups to be vaccinated. As for the elderly, the specific age for people to be classified in this group may vary from one country to another. A majority of countries recommend vaccination for people aged 65 and over, however some recommend it for people aged 60 and over or even 50 and over. In any case, the World Health Assembly (the supreme decision-making body of WHO) which includes all EU/EEA countries, supported a proposal in 2003 that there should be targets for uptake in the elderly of 50% by 2005 and 75% by 2010. Currently most EU/EEA countries fall short of this standard.

Furthermore, many countries especially emphasise the importance of annual immunisation of people living in residential care for the elderly and disabled. The majority of countries in Europe recommend that all health care staff should be immunised against influenza, so that staff more likely to be exposed through their work are protected, as well as the patients they are dealing with.] Few EU countries recommend immunising children or offering vaccines to pregnant women. An expert panel convened by ECDC considered there was as yet insufficient evidence on the burden of infection in children to take any view for or against immunisation.

Influenza vaccines

Because the strains of flu viruses are usually slightly different from year to year, [yearly vaccination is recommended](#) to ensure that the vaccine used has the highest degree of effectiveness against the viruses circulating in that season. However, a virus causing a particular year's epidemic can also occasionally be quite different from the ones against which the vaccine is targeted, in which case the vaccine may be less effective.

Estimates of vaccine efficacy and effectiveness – the extent to which vaccine protects in optimal circumstances (efficacy) and in practice (effectiveness) – vary according to the match between the vaccine and the circulating viral strains, by age group and clinical category. However, the vaccine does reduce the risk of ill-health

and saves lives. ECDC strongly supports the recommendations of Member States and WHO that the vaccine should be used by the high-risk groups.

There are three different types of vaccines in current use in Europe with inactivated viruses, varying in composition. Additionally, a nasal spray has been developed, mostly to be used in children, but for them vaccination is not yet generally recommended in Europe.

Reactions to flu vaccines are usually mild and they include local reactions in the arm where the vaccine was administered (pain, swelling redness), and in fewer cases fever, malaise and muscle pains. These reactions usually disappear within one to two days without treatment.

Examples of sites with information on vaccination

Below are some links to websites from national public health institutions of EU Member States with information on vaccination. This list is not intended to be comprehensive; it aims at offering some examples:

France / Institute for Public Health Surveillance - INVS

http://www.invs.sante.fr/surveillance/grippe_dossier/default.htm

Germany / Federal Centre for Health Education – BZgA (examples of posters and brochures for the promotion of vaccination)

<http://www.bzga.de/?uid=8f9a4bcb963bb5126396e13813710b55&id=medien&sid=148>

Luxembourg / Ministry of Health

http://www.ms.etat.lu/MIN_SANT/Publication/Grippe/recommandations.htm

The Netherlands / National Institute for Public Health and the Environment - RIVM

<http://www.rivm.nl/grieprik/>

Poland / National Institute for Public Health

<http://www.pzh.gov.pl/nowosci/grypa.html#>

Portugal / Ministry of Health

www.dgs.pt – Microsite da gripe - Vacinação

Spain / Ministry of Health

<http://www.msc.es/ciudadanos/enfLesiones/enfTransmisibles/gripe/gripe.htm#prevencion>

Sweden / Swedish Institute for Infectious Disease Control – (Film promoting influenza vaccination for the elderly)

<http://www.smittskyddsinstitutet.se/hem/mest-efterfragat/influensavaccinering/>

United Kingdom / National Health Service

<http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk/article.php?id=289>