

Ageing Well

Seasonal Flu

Revised: 30/08/2017

Introduction

Influenza, or 'flu', is a highly contagious acute viral infection that affects people of all ages. It can range from a mild condition to a very serious illness that can result in hospitalisation and even death. Flu typically starts suddenly with fever, chills, headache, aching muscles and joints, cough, sore throat or other respiratory symptoms. Flu season usually occurs in the winter and usually peaks between December and March.

Although most people who are infected recover within 1-2 weeks, the disease can have a strong impact and can cause serious complications and even death in those who are immunosuppressed, young children, older people, those with long term conditions and those with respiratory illnesses, such as asthma. Flu immunisations are the best protection against flu for people with underlying health problems that put them at risk of complications from influenza (flu).

Each year, a range of healthcare organisations including the [NHS](#), [public health](#) and general practitioners plan their seasonal flu immunisation programme. The purpose of the seasonal flu programme is to provide free flu vaccinations to a range of high at risk groups on an annual basis; patients aged over the age of 65 yrs, children, adults aged 65 yrs (in a clinical at risk group), people with serious medical conditions (such as chronic heart disease, chronic liver disease, diabetes, a weakened immune system etc), carers and health and social care workers and pregnant women. This is achieved by a large scale campaign to raise awareness of the flu vaccination.

Increasing the uptake of flu vaccine among these high risk groups offers protection to those who are most at risk of serious illness or death should they develop flu. In addition it should also contribute to easing winter pressure on primary care services and hospital admissions.

What do we know?

Overall uptake of seasonal flu immunisation declined locally and nationally in 2015/16. In 2015-16 levels of influenza circulating in the UK were moderately low. Table 1 shows that in West Berkshire, flu vaccine uptake was higher than regional and national averages.

% of eligible population who have received the flu vaccine, 2015/16

Group	West Berkshire	South East Region	England
People aged 65 and over	74.8	70.3	71.0
People aged under 65 in a clinical at risk group	51.6	44.9	45.1
2 - 4 year olds	49.1	36.4	34.4

Source: [Public Health Outcomes Framework](#)

It is important that the seasonal flu vaccine is provided to a range of risk groups. Table 2 shows the seasonal flu vaccine uptake among GP patients in at risk groups in [Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group](#). It is important to note seasonal flu vaccination uptake varies by GP practice.

Seasonal Flu Vaccine Uptake (GP Patients) [2015-16](#)

	NHS NEWBURY AND DISTRICT CCG	NHS NORTH AND WEST READING CCG
Patients with Chronic Heart Disease	50.0	51.8
Patients with Chronic Respiratory Disease	52.3	55.2
Patients with Chronic Kidney Disease	59.2	60.1
Patients with Chronic Liver Disease	55.5	53.5
Patients with Diabetes	71.5	72.0
Patients with Immunosuppression	59.4	65.8
Patients with Chronic Neurological Disease	53.8	55.3
Patients with Asplenia or dysfunction of the spleen	40.9	40.0
Patients with morbid obesity (BMI \geq 40)	33.5	35.5

Source: [NHS England area team](#)

Excess winter deaths are linked to cold weather and are found predominantly in the elderly and caused by respiratory causes. Although the seasonal flu virus does not necessarily cause high mortality, for people aged 65 and over who are already unwell, they might be more susceptible to death if they catch flu. Influenza is a major explanatory factor in excess winter deaths. Between 2011 and 2014 (three year average), there was an average of 116 deaths annually of excess winter deaths in West Berkshire.

What is the data telling us?

At risk groups aged below 65 years of age, such as those who are morbidly obese, appear to have poor uptake.

There needs to be an increase in the uptake of seasonal flu vaccination in all at risk groups in order to achieve national targets. This will help reduce excess winter deaths. This may require a more targeted approach within the seasonal flu campaign.

Recommendations for consideration

- Aim to reach target uptake rates as recommended by the NHS
- Work in partnership with relevant stakeholders such as CCGs, Pharmacy, Communications teams, and other health professionals to promote the flu vaccine to vulnerable people.
- Monitor uptake rates for all GP Practices and share information to improve uptake
- Evaluation and lessons learnt that will be incorporated into future plans and processes.

Other services and partner organisations

West Berkshire Council promote the 'Stay Well This Winter' Campaign which was launched in 2015 by NHS England and Public Health England. This advises people to get the flu vaccination, keep you house warm, seek help early if you are feeling unwell, obtain any prescriptions before Christmas Eve and keep an eye on elderly neighbours and friends.

Other relevant sources of information include:

[The Vaccine Knowledge Project](#)

[PHE Flu information](#)

National and local strategies

[Public Health England: The seasonal influenza programme for England annual letter](#)

Other chapters you might be interested in

End of Life Care
Excess Winter Deaths
Falls and Mobility
Mental Health (Old Age)
Preventable Sight Loss

If you have any questions about this chapter, please contact Public Health and Wellbeing Team on publichealthandwellbeing@westberks.gov.uk or 01635 503437