

Healthcare professional – Q&A

What's the latest on the staff vaccination programme for swine flu?

Scientists have now developed an approved vaccine for the A(H1N1) or Swine Flu virus. The UK has contracts in place with two manufacturers – Glaxo Smith Kline (GSK) and Baxter.

Both vaccines have now been licensed. This means we will soon be in a position to begin administering them to priority groups, including frontline NHS staff, when supplies arrive from the manufacturers.

Who should have the vaccination?

The Chief Medical Officer has recommended that all frontline health professionals should get the vaccine as soon as possible to protect themselves, their patients and their colleagues.

Staff who will be invited to have the vaccine include everyone who has regular clinical contact with patients, and those who are directly involved in patient care.

This includes doctors, dentists, midwives, nurses, paramedics, ambulance drivers, occupational therapists and radiographers, for example. Students and trainees in these disciplines, and volunteers working with patients will also be included.

Eligibility is not about a person's job title, but the work they are doing: if a person is providing frontline healthcare, they should have the vaccine.

Why do I need the vaccination?

There are three reasons why we want as many frontline staff to get the vaccine as possible:

First, Swine Flu can lead to serious complications in people with underlying health conditions, so it is important we do everything we can to stop vulnerable patients from catching the virus. Vaccinating front line health professionals is the first line of defence for patients as it reduces the chances of staff transmitting the virus in the course of their duties.

Second, vaccination can help us protect frontline health professionals from unnecessary risk. Health professionals are more likely to be exposed to Swine Flu than the rest of the population, and whilst Swine Flu is generally mild, even healthy people can become seriously ill from it or even die.

Third and finally, vaccinating staff is the single most effective way we can prevent disruption to the NHS due to staff absence. This could be a very tough winter for the NHS, as Swine Flu combines with the normal winter

pressures we experience (see Fig 1, below: it shows flu consultations are already ahead of 1999/00 levels, which was the worst flu winter for 15 years).

Vaccination is crucial for keeping absence rates down and allowing the NHS to continue delivering the best possible care for patients in the months ahead.

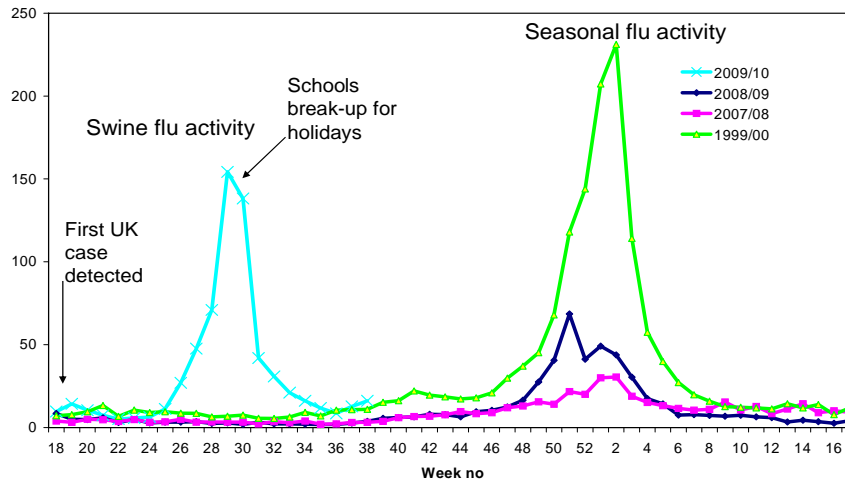


Figure 1: Weekly number of GP consultations per 100,000 population for influenza/flu-like illness (England and Wales). Source: RCGP, Research and Surveillance Centre

Is the vaccination compulsory?

No, the vaccine will be optional – though we are strongly recommending that all frontline NHS staff take it up.

What is the difference between the two vaccines?

Baxter and GSK have different methods of producing the vaccine. The main difference is in the way the virus used in the vaccine is produced. The virus for the GSK vaccine (Pandemrix) is prepared in hens' eggs, the same way as the seasonal flu vaccine. The Baxter vaccine (Celvapan) is made from virus that is grown in cultured cells.

What does the vaccination involve?

People will need either one or two doses of vaccine, at least three weeks apart. Further advice will follow.

Can I work between doses or will I be infectious?

Yes, it is safe for NHS staff to carry on with normal duties during the interval between doses. The vaccines contain inactivated forms of the virus, so they do not make the person infectious.

How long will the immunity last – will I need to be vaccinated every year?

We expect this swine flu vaccine will provide protection against swine flu for several years after vaccination.

However, it is important to stress, the Swine Flu vaccine will **only** protect against the pandemic flu strain. Staff must continue to have their annual seasonal flu jab if they want to be protected from the 'normal' winter flu strains every year.

How can you be sure the vaccines are safe if they haven't been used before?

While both vaccines are new, they are very similar to existing H5N1 vaccines, that GSK and Baxter have already developed.

These vaccines have undergone clinical trials involving many thousands of people, including the elderly and young children, which showed these vaccines are generally safe and effective.

Previous studies have also shown that changing the strain of virus in a vaccine does not substantially affect its safety profile. These extensive trials therefore give us confidence that the new Swine Flu vaccines carry a very low risk.

We will, of course, continue with clinical trials involving the swine flu vaccine to monitor for any sign of rare side effects. But the evidence we have suggests that the risk of a serious reaction is extremely small, and outweighed by the risk of falling seriously ill from the virus itself.

Is there a link with Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS)?

No, there is no proven link. It's true that the Swine Flu vaccine used in the United States in the 1970s was linked to a small risk of GBS – affecting about one in every 100,000 people who were vaccinated. However, the 1970s vaccine was different to the vaccines we are using today.

I've heard the vaccine causes flu – will I get sick after having the jab?

The vaccines contain inactivated flu viruses so they can't cause flu. However, as with most vaccines, some people experience mild side effects, including a slight fever and aches and pains. These reactions usually disappear within one to two days without treatment. Most people will experience nothing worse than a sore arm.

Does the vaccine contain mercury?

Pandemrix from GSK contains very small quantities of thiomersal, a preservative that contains mercury. Thiomersal has been used in vaccines for

over 60 years to prevent bacterial contamination. Studies by the World Health Organisation and the UK Commission on Human Medicine have found no evidence of health risks linked to thiomersal.

Can the vaccine be given to people with an egg allergy?

Because of the way the GSK (Pandemrix) vaccine is made (see above), people with a confirmed anaphylactic reaction to egg products should not have this vaccine.

However, the Baxter vaccine is not manufactured using eggs and can be given to those with confirmed anaphylactic reaction to eggs and egg products.

I'm allergic to latex – are the vaccines safe for me?

Yes, both vaccines are manufactured and packaged without latex.

Does the vaccine contains pork products?

Some porcine products are used in the manufacturing process of the Baxter vaccine. However there are no detectable traces of these products in the vaccine itself. The GSK vaccine (Pandemrix) does not contain porcine products.

For more advice on vaccines and faith groups, please see:
www.immunisation.nhs.uk/Library/Search?stags=&terms=porcine.

Do I need the vaccine if I've already had Swine Flu?

Unless the diagnosis was confirmed by a laboratory test, it is impossible to say whether the illness actually was Swine Flu. As a result, staff should still be vaccinated.

Is it safe to have my seasonal flu jab and the swine flu vaccine at the same time?

Yes, the swine flu vaccine can be given at the same time as other vaccines, including the seasonal flu vaccine.

I've never had the seasonal flu vaccine before and haven't had any problems with flu – why should the Swine Flu be any different?

Swine Flu is different as it is a new virus which means most people don't have any inbuilt resistance. People who never normally get ill from seasonal flu may therefore get sick from Swine Flu.

We know that Swine Flu can lead to serious complications. The most severe cases tend to involve people with underlying health conditions – but even among healthy people, Swine Flu has the potential to be a dangerous disease.

What support have we received from National Staff Organisations?

We have worked closely and constructively with the health trades unions and representative bodies, through our national Social Partnership Forum, on NHS preparedness for pandemic flu. This includes the strategy for rolling-out swine flu vaccination to NHS staff.