



## Speakers' Corner - NHS England's (London) Kenny Gibson on why the flu vaccine is important.

This month Kenny Gibson explains the importance of the flu vaccination programme. Kenny is Head of Public Health Commissioning for NHS England (London) and their lead on flu vaccination; he is also a qualified nurse.

This winter, the levels of influenza – or flu; in London have been relatively low until the first week of 2016 when we've seen a small rise in flu cases in the region. When these cases are reported, it can lead to complacency in individuals who have already had the flu vaccination, with some also citing lack of confidence in the vaccine. However, this is one of the silent triumphs of the flu vaccine: with more people vaccinated, the spread of flu is reduced. As there is such low circulation of the virus, it's difficult to assess the effectiveness of the vaccine in preventing further transmission.

Seasonal flu vaccines are designed to protect against infection and illness caused by the flu viruses that are most common during the colder parts of year, according to research. Most years, the vaccine reduces risk of illness by 50-60% amongst the overall population and reduces hospitalisation for flu-like illness and pneumonia in the over 65s by 30-70%. For older people living in nursing or care homes, the flu vaccine is 50-60% effective in preventing hospitalisation and up to 80% effective in preventing death from flu complications. Last winter, it was widely reported in the media that the flu vaccine didn't protect against the H3N2 circulating strain yet the vaccine overall was 34% effective against circulating other strains (29.3% against influenza A and 46.3% against influenza B). This meant that it reduced the risk of an individual acquiring flu by a third. This is higher than initially predicted by Public Health England and was effective against two of the three circulating flu strains. Sometimes, the flu strains that are circulating change and can make vaccines less effective. This is what happened in 2014/15. It is too early to say how effective the vaccine is this year but Public Health England is confident that this year's match of vaccine to flu strain is more effective than that of 2014/15.

Vaccine uptake rates are slightly lower than last year. The latest available information for Week 50 shows that in London, 63% of those aged 65 years and older, 40.1% of the under 65s at risk group and 36% of pregnant women have been vaccinated. This compares to 65.6%, 45.5% and 36.7% for the respective groups for the same period the previous year. A similar decrease can be seen for the age two to four child cohorts with 22.9% of two year olds, 24.8% of three year olds and 19% of four year olds vaccinated in GP practices compared to 26.1%, 28.2% and 20% for the previous year. Reporting practices are also down: 94.8% of GP practices responding to the seasonal flu survey compared to 97% last year.

The pharmacy delivery of the seasonal flu programme continues to grow with a total of 136,952 vaccines given in London by the end of the first week of January. This total exceeds the 2014/15 overall total of 116,012 people by far. Over 55% of those who received the vaccine were aged 65 years and older.

Getting a vaccine remains the best way to protect against flu. For vulnerable groups – such as adults aged over 65 years, pregnant women and individuals with long term conditions – the flu vaccine can not only protect against acquiring the illness, it can lessen the severity of flu should a vaccinated person get it. This results in fewer hospitalisations and deaths in these particular groups. Apart from the individual benefits, vaccination of healthy adults (such as health professionals) and children has an important role to play in population immunity. The vaccine works best in healthy adults and children as it provides a means to interrupt transmission, reduces school and work absences and protects those vulnerable people who are susceptible to the complications of flu.

You can find resources and updates from Public Health England on the flu vaccination programme online here. Please ensure your members and their practice teams have had their flu jab before it's too late.

Kenny Gibson Head of Public Health Commissioning NHS England (London)

### Additional Information

Further to Kenny's article, you may like to refer to the Vaccine Update guidance issued at the end of last year. It contains the following updates:

MenB and central supply of paracetamol phase out

Shelf-life for Fluenz Tetra and FluMist (2-17 years nasal flu vaccine)

National free dried blood spot testing service for infants born to hepB+ mothers

NHS Employers have updated their Vaccs and Imms FAQs to include a question on MenB and paracetamol, as well as Flumist expiry dates.