

Influenza vaccination
HEOPS Position Statement
12/09/2024

Background

Vaccination against influenza viruses has been available for many years. There are several different flu viruses that can cause infection in humans. Furthermore, the virus tends to change regularly because of mutation. Therefore, every year, the content of the vaccine is reviewed globally to ensure the vaccine matches the most prevalent viruses in that particular year based on epidemiological data.

Aims of the vaccine

Protection of the individual

Flu infection is mild in the majority of people. However, in certain groups of the population, it can be quite dangerous with potentially devastating consequences. The vulnerable groups generally include elderly (>65), people living with certain long-term health conditions, people with weakened immunity because of an underlying condition or medications (such as chemotherapy), people living in care homes and pregnant woman. Flu vaccine may provide protection against contracting the infection, reduce the severity of the infection and can reduce the risk of more serious consequences.

Protection of others

The vaccine can potentially reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others. This is quite important in certain professions who work with vulnerable groups. For those who work with vulnerable groups, reducing the spread of the virus may reduce demand on the NHS, hospital services and reduce the risk of illness and death from influenza in people with a weakened immune system.

Sickness and absence caused by flu

Sickness and absence depend on many factors therefore the information about the role of flu vaccination to reduce sickness and absence is not straight forward. A review in 2017 indicated that flu vaccination for NHS staff is associated with reduced sickness absence. However, for other sectors, the effect of vaccine on working days lost remains uncertain.

Access to vaccine in the UK

National free offer

The flu vaccine is offered annually for free to vulnerable groups, children and their carers. This is usually available in multiple locations including GP practices, pharmacies, some hospitals, vaccination centres and schools.

Employers' funded

Industries that provide service to vulnerable groups such as healthcare and social care provide free vaccine to their front-line employees.

Commercial offer

The vaccine is available through pharmacists and other providers for people who are not in the aforementioned eligible group for a fee. Many employers provide a voucher system (or other arrangement) for their employees to receive the vaccine this way which means it is free for the employee and funded by the employer.

HEOPS statement

HEOPS strongly recommend that staff and students who work with vulnerable groups such as health and social care employees and students, to receive the annual flu vaccine. This is usually available to students through their placements however, it may require an agreement between the university and the placement to extend the offer to the university staff and students who are at on placement during the flu season.

HEOPS strongly advise staff and students who are vulnerable themselves to take the national free offer and to be vaccinated through their GP, local pharmacy or convenient location.

For all other staff and students, the university should balance potential benefit of the vaccine (see above under Aims) versus the cost and operational implications.

Occupational health resource, whether in house or outsourced, are provided based on the standard activities and may not include flu vaccination. Therefore, involving OH in a flu vaccination programme may require additional resources otherwise this may affect the usual service delivery. This should inform university's strategy to choose any or a combination of the following options;

- To encourage vulnerable staff and students to take up the national free offer.
- To roll out a voucher system or other agreement with commercial flu vaccine providers in order for staff (and or students) to receive the vaccine elsewhere.
- In discussion with OH, to roll out of flu vaccination programme led and / or delivered by OH.

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On behalf of the Board of HEOPS