School-based flu vaccination programme 2026-27: information for schools

Compiled by PHA Health Protection Directorate, Immunisation Team
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This information explains the reason why the national influenza (flu) immunisation programme is offered to children in P1-P7 and Year 8-12 and answers questions that schools might have about their participation in the programme.

Please make this information available to all staff in your school, particularly those who are likely to speak to parents and guardians or children about the vaccination.

Introduction

The flu vaccination programme in schools will be starting in the autumn term. Flu and other respiratory infections circulate in the autumn and winter months which can lead to increased sickness and absence within schools during this time. Flu vaccination is an important way to help protect children and the wider school community against flu and prevent the spread of this infection.

Flu kills thousands of people every year. It is an unpredictable virus and the vaccine is the best protection we have against it. The main purpose of the school-based flu vaccination programme is to reduce transmission in the community. Children can pass flu on to others in their immediate family and wider community, many of whom may be at higher risk from the complications of flu. Children whose parents or guardians agree for them to have the flu vaccine also benefit from the protection it provides to them as individuals. It helps to contribute to a healthy school environment, reduces school absences, and indirectly protects teachers and other school staff as they are less likely to catch flu from their pupils.

We are grateful for the continued support that schools have given by supporting school-based vaccination sessions. The relationship between education and Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust school nursing, and teacher support and participation is fundamental to achieving a high uptake of the flu vaccine and to ensure a safe and efficient vaccination session in the school setting. This year, school nursing teams have a **very tight timeframe of 16 weeks** in which to complete vaccination in primary and secondary schools. The programme therefore requires a high degree of collaboration, coordination and information exchange between schools, parents and guardians and school nursing.

Schools have a key role in promoting uptake of the flu vaccination programme through the relationship that you have with parents and guardians. The influence of all school staff is an important factor in the success of the school-based flu vaccination programme. To support this, we ask that schools **use any available communication channels to help promote uptake of the flu vaccine**. This might include sharing information through your school's website, social media channels, parent communication platforms, information sent home with pupils or information displayed within the school buildings.

This year we are asking schools to assist the Public Health Agency (PHA) in addressing the recent decrease in flu vaccine uptake to reduce the impact of flu on the health and social care system and wider community. To assist with this, the PHA have developed a short video aimed at children, parents and guardians and all staff, and we would encourage you to share this widely through your communication channels including any social media channels you have available. The link to the video is: https://vimeo.com/452145182.

Questions and answers for schools

1. Overview of the school-based flu vaccination programme

What is the annual seasonal flu vaccine programme?

The Northern Ireland flu vaccination programme is a long-standing programme that is based on independent clinical expert advice from the Joint Committee for vaccinations and Immunisations (JCVI) that advises the four UK Health Ministers and Chief Medical Officers to inform policy. The current flu vaccination policy aims to reduce serious morbidity and mortality (illness and death) from flu by immunising those people most at risk of serious illness or death from flu. Introduction of the flu vaccination programme also reduces transmission of the infection in the community, thereby contributing to protection of vulnerable people who cannot be vaccinated or may not respond well to their own immunisations. This policy is in line with most other countries that have seasonal influenza vaccination programmes. It is offered every year because flu viruses are always changing, so the vaccines are made each year to provide protection against the current circulating flu viruses.

Why is the flu vaccine offered to school-aged children?

The annual influenza vaccination programme has included all primary-school-aged children since 2013, and was extended in 2021/22 to include all children up to and including Year 12 in secondary schools. An important factor in introducing the school-based flu vaccine programme has been the availability of a vaccine that is given as a spray into the nose. This is easier to give, especially to large numbers of young children, and has been shown to be more effective against flu.

Children are the main source of transmission of flu in the population and can pass it on to others in their immediate family and wider community, many of whom may be at higher risk from the complications of flu. Offering flu vaccine to children reduces the spread of infection from children to other children, to adults and to those in clinical risk groups of any age.

Why is flu vaccine delivered through schools?

Schools-based immunisation programmes provide a very effective means of reaching and delivering important health programmes to large groups of children, and can result in good uptake of the vaccine. The first decade of the programme reinforced this with high uptake rates being achieved in schools in Northern Ireland for most years. Unfortunately, the uptake has declined in recent years.

Has the education profession been consulted about this programme?

Yes, the Department of Health has been working with the Department of Education and Education Authority to ensure that their views on how the programme is delivered are reflected. The PHA also works closely with the Education Authority in the operations of delivering the programme.

Why is the school-based flu vaccination programme important?

Many respiratory infections, including flu, COVID-19, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and pertussis (whooping cough) are circulating within our community, particularly during the autumn and winter months. This poses a risk to the most vulnerable in our society. Many people who are vulnerable to serious respiratory infections are also most at risk from complications of flu. We also want to reduce pressure on our health and social care organisations by improving uptake of the flu vaccine. Those at risk from flu are offered the flu vaccine for their own protection but we also want to further reduce flu transmission in the community by vaccinating children and reducing spread of flu.

There are also benefits for the school from vaccinating the children against flu. It helps to provide a healthy school environment by protecting the pupils and, indirectly, the staff. Research has shown that the flu programme reduces school absences due to illness.

Which children will be offered the vaccination this autumn?

All primary school and secondary school-age children (up to and including Year 12) will be offered nasal flu vaccine and vaccinated in schools by their local HSC Trust school nursing teams.

GPs are also involved in delivery of the flu vaccine to pre-school children aged 6 months to 5 years. They may also vaccinate children who are not able to receive the nasal flu vaccine and will offer an alternative type of vaccine within GP practices.

How is the vaccine administered?

- Almost all children will be able to have the vaccine as a nasal spray (up the nose), which is a quick and painless process. The nasal spray may also be better at reducing the spread of flu to others than an injected vaccine.
- The nasal spray vaccine is the preferred flu vaccine for children.
- It has been given to millions of children and has an excellent safety record.
- Serious side effects are uncommon but children can develop a runny or blocked nose, headache, some tiredness or loss of appetite that lasts for a short period.
- There are some children who cannot have the nasal spray because of pre-existing medical conditions or treatments. All questions about suitability should be directed to the HSC school nursing team.

Catching flu from the nasal spray droplets or from vaccinated individuals ‘shedding’ the virus

Unvaccinated contacts are not at risk of catching flu from the vaccine, either through being in the same room where flu vaccine has been given or by being in contact with a recently vaccinated individual. Although vaccinated children are known to shed virus for a few days after vaccination, it is less able to spread from person to person than the natural infection. The amount of virus shed is normally below the levels needed to pass on infection to others and the virus does not survive for long outside of the body. This is in contrast to natural flu infection, which spreads easily during the flu season.

Excluding children from school during the period when the vaccine is being offered, or in the following weeks, is not necessary. The only exception to this would be the tiny number of children who are extremely immunocompromised (for example those who have just had a bone marrow transplant). These children are normally advised not to attend school anyway because of the much higher risk of being in contact with other infections, including natural flu infection, that spread in schools.

Why was the programme extended to include Year 8 – 12 children?

The schools flu programme was extended in 2021/22 to include all children up to and including Year 12 in secondary schools. The Government has secured additional vaccine and administrative resource to enable continued delivery of the flu vaccination programme in secondary schools in 2026/27. This is part of our wider planning for winter, as we are likely to see flu and other serious respiratory infections circulating at the same time. We ask you to work with your local HSC Trust school nursing teams as you have done in the past with other vaccine programmes delivered through secondary schools.

2. Delivery of the flu vaccination programme in the school setting

When will the flu vaccination programme need to take place?

To be most effective, flu vaccine needs to be given during the autumn term (September to January) before flu tends to circulate. The vaccination programme will start in the majority of schools in September and be completed before the Christmas break but may need to continue into January in a small number of schools if additional mop up appointments are required. The flu vaccines are manufactured every year and do not become available until September. Therefore, there is only a short period of about 16 weeks to vaccinate all eligible children in Northern Ireland. As the flu virus can change each year, vaccination is required annually.

What will schools be asked to do?

Schools will be asked to:

- Work with the HSC school nursing team to develop and agree the best approach for implementing the programme in the school. The more time that is given to planning, the more likely it is that the programme will run smoothly;
- Ensure class lists are accurate and that the most up to date information is available for HSC school nurse teams - review class lists, identify pupil movements in and transfer of pupils out;
- Identify a designated point of contact within the school for the HSC school nurse team to liaise with to coordinate delivery of the flu vaccination programme;
- Agree a date for the vaccine session(s) with HSC school nursing teams and ensure the date is adhered to unless there are exceptional circumstances. Ensure there are no conflicting dates with other school events e.g. school trips, visitor events etc.;
- Provide a suitable location for the vaccination to take place (e.g. school hall). The HSC school nursing team will be able to discuss specific requirements;
- Send information (including consent forms) home with children, collect completed consent forms in

a timely manner and give **unopened envelopes**, by class, to HSC school health teams;

- Ensure parents and guardians know which day vaccination will take place and let children know what will happen.
- Endorse the school flu vaccination programme and send reminders through your usual channels such as email or text distribution lists, parent apps, parent newsletters, website, visual display screens etc.;
- If there are any changes to circumstances within the school that may clash with these arranged vaccination sessions (such as school trips or other events being planned) please contact the HSC school nursing team to communicate this information to avoid wasting staff and vaccine resources;
- In the event of exceptional closure on the day of flu vaccination a date will be reoffered or rescheduled. In the event of rescheduling the session schools will be asked to advise parents and guardians of this new date;
- On the day of the vaccination session, assist HSC school nurses in identifying the correct child for vaccine, for example if they are in P1, English is not their first language or there are children in the class with similar names;
- Supervise and assist with flow of children to, from and during sessions as directed by the school nurse teams.

A timeline for planning the programme is available within Appendix 1 to help ensure the flu programme runs smoothly and efficiently.

Will delivering flu vaccine through schools cause upheaval to the school routine?

The HSC Trust school nursing teams is accustomed to working closely with schools when delivering vaccinations and will continue to work with schools to ensure minimum disruption.

We appreciate that delivering most of the programme through schools will involve children being away from lessons for a short period of time. However, for the individual child this should not be for a long period, as the vaccination itself only takes a few minutes.

Who will be giving the vaccine to the children?

The programme will be delivered by your local HSC Trust school nursing team including the school nurse, public health staff nurses, child health assistant staff and administrative staff. The vaccinator may be part of the school nursing team, or from a specialist immunisation team. Registered nurses will administer the vaccination.

What if the vaccination session in school is scheduled around the transfer test/SEAG?

Because of the short timescale in which to deliver the flu vaccination programme across all schools in Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that some vaccine sessions will have to be held around the time of the transfer test. The side effects of the vaccine (if any are experienced) are minor and not noticeable in most

children. As this is the thirteenth year that children are being offered the vaccine, a high proportion of children will previously have received the vaccine before this year. We therefore expect that most parents and guardians of P7 children will consent to their child being vaccinated regardless of the date of the session. Having the vaccine each year will reduce their chance of becoming unwell with flu and spreading it within the community. This would also provide an extra level of protection from becoming unwell around the time of the exam as well.

It is only the child's parent or guardian who can consent or withdraw consent for vaccination if the session is held around the time of the transfer test. Schools should not develop their own withdrawal forms, as this is a parental decision. If a parent or guardian decides to withdraw consent after previously consenting to the vaccine this should be done by contacting the HSC school nursing team.

What happens if a child is not present on the day when the HSC school nursing team comes into the school to offer flu vaccination?

If a child misses the vaccination or is unwell on the day the parent will be sent a letter by the HSC school nursing team explaining that they should contact their GP to arrange an appointment to get the vaccination. Where many children have been absent on the day, the school nursing team may offer a mop-up clinic at a later date.

What else can schools do to provide information to parents and guardians about the programme?

Schools now have websites, apps, parent newsletters and email/text contact with parents and guardians, which can all be used as ways to provide information about the programme and/or to encourage them to return the consent forms in a timely manner. Schools have a key role in promoting uptake of the flu vaccination programme through the relationship that you have already established with parents and guardians.

Resources for education professionals can be found in the professional resources section of the PHA website Professional resources | HSC Public Health Agency.

Suggested text for a newsletter/website is given below, which can be adapted as appropriate:

Flu Vaccination programme

The Health and Social Care school nurse team will be visiting the school on [insert date] for the annual flu vaccination programme. Consent forms *have been/are being* [delete as appropriate] given out to children and need to be completed and returned to school by [insert date].

The flu vaccination programme has been introduced to give protection to children against flu, which can be a very unpleasant illness and can be serious, even in healthy children. It will also help to stop the spread of flu in the community and will protect people around them as well. The vaccine is usually given to children by a simple spray into their nose and they can return to their lessons very quickly afterwards. Please read the leaflet provided which provides more detail on the flu vaccination programme. Please contact the HSC school health team if you have any further questions on [insert phone number].

Further information about the flu vaccination programme and leaflets in other languages can be found at: https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/flu-vaccine.

A short video aimed at children explaining the flu vaccination programme has been developed by the Public Health Agency and can be found on the following link: https://vimeo.com/452145182.

3. Consent

What are the arrangements for parents and guardians consenting to vaccinations?

The HSC Trust school nursing teams will provide schools with enveloped packs for parents and guardians that contains a letter explaining the programme, an information leaflet from PHA explaining the flu vaccination programme for children and a consent form to be signed by the parent or guardian. We ask that this pack is sent home with the child in advance of the scheduled vaccination session and the consent form should be signed by the parent or guardian and returned to the school as soon as possible and prior to the vaccination session.

We would like to remind all schools that consent forms contain sensitive medical information and should be treated as confidential at all times. If any children have already received the flu vaccine by their GP, parents should indicate this on the consent form, so that the child is not offered another flu vaccination. The consent forms should be returned in sealed envelopes and should not be opened.

Responsibility for securing consent rests with Trusts who are delivering the programme via school nursing teams. Schools have no responsibility either for obtaining consent from parents or guardians or accountability for the delivery of the programme. School staff should redirect enquiries and declined consents to the HSC Trust school nursing teams.

What happens if parents or guardians change their mind and withdraw consent?

It is very important that the HSC Trust school nurses know about this. If a parent contacts the school to say they are withdrawing consent they should be told that they should **contact the school nurse** to give them this information rather than the message being taken by the school. This ensures that the school nurses can obtain all the information they need directly from the parent or guardian and can discuss their decision with them. Schools will have contact numbers for all school nursing teams.

Can parents or guardians refuse to have their child vaccinated?

Yes, parents can decline the offer of vaccination. Parents or guardians need to give their consent for the vaccination (no child will be vaccinated without parental consent).

What happens if a child has not received a consent form?

Every child should be offered the chance to receive the flu vaccine. If they have not been provided with a consent form, for example if they moved to the school after the class lists were created, please inform your school nurse as soon as possible so they can send a consent form to the school.

Can schools share children's personal data with HSC school nursing teams under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)?

Yes. School-based vaccination services are vitally important to improving children's health and supporting their educational development and attainment. The data sharing required for school-based vaccination services is therefore in the public interest. The Education Authority has shared a template Privacy Notice for schools to use on their website. This privacy notice can be found here: Data Protection School Resource Hub | Education Authority Northern Ireland (eani.org.uk). This Privacy notice explains to parents, guardians and pupils who their information may be shared with and highlights that information may be shared with HSC Trusts. If you have further queries please speak to your designated Education Authority Data Protection Officer for advice.

Appendix 1

Timeline for the Implementation of school-based flu vaccination programme 2026-27

Developing a timeline will help the programme run smoothly and efficiently.

Month	Action
May to June	• A member of HSC school nursing team contacts school to begin partnership planning • School identifies key staff • A member of HSC school nursing team contacts school to confirm the date the vaccination programme will be held • A member of HSC school nursing team begins planning • School moves computerised class list up each year at the end of June to ensure that class lists are accurate for school Nursing Team.
August to mid-September	• A member of HSC school nursing team will contact schools to confirm date and time for the vaccination session (via email/letter) • Due to the electronic school roll, it is anticipated that schools will not need to provide whole school class lists • HSC school nursing team will deliver the parent information consent envelope to schools and confirm date and time for the letters to be issued to parents and guardians & date to be returned • Schools to distribute envelopes to parents and guardians for return within one week • Schools to put information in newsletter/website/app or other means about the programme • Schools can assist by ensuring consent forms are returned in sealed envelopes within one week via school parent texting service/reminders/app • Schools to oversee return of parental consent forms and returns to be organised by class and stored in unopened envelopes • HSC school nursing team will collect envelopes at school
Mid - Sept to end of programme	• As above points 4 to 6 • Arrangements are confirmed locally in the lead up to flu vaccination sessions by the HSC school nursing teams.