

Influenza Vaccination (the “flu jab”)

Patient Information Leaflet for People Receiving Chemotherapy or Radiotherapy

What is the flu jab?

The flu jab is aimed at protecting people against the flu virus. As the strain of flu virus changes every year, this means it is necessary to have the jab annually which should be given during the Autumn or early Winter.

Should people who are having chemotherapy or radiotherapy have the flu jab?

Yes. The Department of Health recommends vaccination for people who are immunosuppressed because of disease or treatment. If you are having, or have recently finished cancer treatment, you should ask your GP or practice nurse about the jab.

If you have recently received a targeted immunotherapy against PD-1 or similar there may be a higher risk of side effects. However the vaccine does appear to be effective. If you are due or have recently had a bone marrow transplant seek advice from the transplant team.

Can the flu jab actually cause flu?

No. The flu jab doesn't contain any live virus, so it cannot cause flu.

The nasal flu vaccination used in children does contain live flu virus although there have been no reported cases in immunocompromised patients inadvertently exposed.

Will the flu jab stop me getting flu?

You may not get full immunity from the flu jab. However, unless you have the vaccination you may have no protection from the current flu strains.

Is there anyone who should not have the flu jab?

Yes. You should not be vaccinated if you have a serious allergy to hens' eggs.

Is there a higher risk of side effects for people who are having chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

Not for patients having standard chemotherapy although possibly for those receiving immunotherapy. Side-effects may include soreness at the injection site and, less commonly, a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days after vaccination.

When should the vaccine be given to people who are having chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

If you are due to start treatment and have not already had the flu jab, you should have it at least 2 weeks before you begin treatment. This is to allow time for your body to produce antibodies which help protect you against the flu virus. If this is not possible, vaccinating between courses of chemotherapy is safe and effective. While you are having chemotherapy treatment you are at most risk from infections 10-14 days after your last dose of chemotherapy. As the side effects of the flu jab may mimic signs of infection it is recommended that you avoid having the jab during this period. The vaccine may be given during a course of radiotherapy.

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