

Chief Medical Officer
Professor Sir Michael McBride



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

HSS(MD) 17/2024

For Action:

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/
HSC Trusts/NIAS,
GP Medical Advisers, Strategic Planning
and Performance Group – SPPG,
All General Practitioners and GP Locums (*for onward
distribution to practice staff*)
SPPG Head of Pharmacy and Medicines
Management (*for onward distribution to community
pharmacies*)

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Your Ref:
Our Ref: HSS (MD) 17/2024
Date: 29 May 2024

Please see attached full addressee list

Dear Colleague

END OF THE 2023/24 INFLUENZA SEASON AND RELATED ISSUES

ACTION REQUIRED

Influenza Vaccination Programme

Chief Executives must ensure this information is drawn to the attention of all staff involved in the seasonal influenza vaccination programme, including:

- school health teams, health visitors, community children nurses, and paediatricians
- physicians managing patients with chronic medical conditions, oncologists, geriatricians, district nurses, treatment room nurses
- midwives, obstetricians
- Occupational Health Departments, Trust Peer Vaccinators

The SPPG must ensure this information is cascaded to all General Practitioners, practice managers and community pharmacies for onward distribution to all staff involved in the seasonal flu vaccination programme.

The RQIA must ensure this information is cascaded to all Independent Sector Care Homes for onward distribution to all staff involved in the seasonal flu programme.

Introduction

1. The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to the end of the Influenza season for 2023/24. The Influenza ('Flu) vaccination programme ended on 31 March 2024. Providers are therefore **not required** to vaccinate pregnant women or any other population group against Influenza from this point onwards and over the summer in 2024 but GPs can still phone on a case-by-case basis to Movianto to request the 'Flu vaccine if they feel it is indicated.
2. We would like to extend a huge thank you to all those involved for your hard work on the 'Flu vaccination programme during 2023/24 during very challenging times. Delivery of this important public health programme has again been achieved alongside continued delivery of the COVID-19 vaccination programme to which many of you have also contributed.
3. We want to specifically acknowledge all those involved in the planning and delivery of the Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Programme, including the Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, PHA, SPPG, HSC Trusts, NIAS, Community Pharmacies and General Practitioners and their staff. We also wish to convey our sincere thanks to the many clinical, managerial and other staff throughout the HSC all of whom responded so admirably and professionally throughout the winter, and so minimised the potential impact of Influenza on patients and service users/clients and on our health and social care system.

Influenza Activity

4. According to Public Health Agency (PHA) surveillance systems, the majority of Influenza activity in this year's season was observed from early December 2023 to early March 2024, peaking around mid-January 2024. The majority of influenza subtypes detected in laboratory tests were A(H3N2).
5. Influenza activity has now decreased across surveillance indicators and has now returned to pre-season levels.
6. The seasonal 'Flu vaccination programme remains an important public health intervention and a key priority for 2024/25 to reduce morbidity, mortality and hospitalisation associated with Influenza at a time when the HSC will continue to manage significant pressures. It is therefore essential that every effort is made to optimise uptake of the coming season's vaccine by all eligible individuals.

Surveillance

7. The Public Health Agency's regular Influenza bulletin is the definitive source of public health surveillance information on Influenza activity for Northern Ireland throughout the season. The surveillance of seasonal Influenza depends on accurate, timely data produced by GP sentinel practices, secondary care services and laboratory services. Data are collated by the PHA's Influenza Team to produce the bulletin which enables us to follow the course of Influenza activity throughout each season and respond accordingly. We would like to thank all those involved in the production of this information population health data and intelligence.

Use of Antiviral Medicines

8. The Public Health Agency surveillance data, reported in the regularly published Influenza bulletin, confirms that the circulation of Influenza virus in the community in NI has remained at baseline to low levels. This means that:
 - General Practitioners and other prescribers working in primary care should not prescribe antivirals for the prevention or treatment of Influenza on a HS21 prescription form.
 - Community Pharmacists should not supply antiviral medicines in primary care on presentation of a HS21 prescription form.

This advice does not impact on prescribing of antivirals in hospitals.

Vaccine Uptake/Coverage

9. Finalised data pertaining to seasonal 'Flu vaccine uptake shows that by the end of March 2024, 78% of those aged over 65 years in Northern Ireland were vaccinated, compared to approximately 83% in this group in the 2022/23 Influenza season.
10. The data indicates that 81.6% of care home residents were vaccinated against Influenza in 2023/24, compared to 82.5% of residents in 2022/23.
11. This year's 'Flu vaccine programme was extended to all those aged 50 to 64 on 17 January 2024. Uptake in 50–64-year-olds was approximately 28.9%, compared to an approximate uptake of 51.5% in this group in 2022/23¹. Uptake in those under 50 years of age (18-49 years) in an 'at-risk' group was 11.9% this year.

¹ The 22/23 programme opened to 50–64-year-olds from the beginning of the programme on 19 September

12. Uptake in 2023/24 among pregnant women was 24.9%², this compares to an uptake of 29.8% in this group at the end of the 22/23 programme.
13. Uptake in 2023/24 for 2–4-year-olds was 32.9%, compared to 33% in 2022/23, while 68.6% of primary school children were vaccinated against Influenza compared to 70.7% in 2022/23. For those in years 8 to 12 in secondary schools, 56.5% of were vaccinated by end March 2024 compared to 61% achieved in the previous year.
14. The VMS (vaccine management system) reports uptake among frontline³ Trust-employed health and social care workers (HSCWs) as 21.5% this year, compared to 33.9% achieved in 2022/23, while data indicates that 10.2% of care home staff were vaccinated in 2023/24 compared to 16.9% of these staff vaccinated in 2022/23.
15. Influenza vaccine uptake rates are published in the final influenza surveillance bulletin for the 2023/24 season, which was published by PHA on Thursday 23 May 2024.
16. I would urge all providers to continue their commitment and resolve in the coming year 2024/25 with the goal of increasing uptake rates across all eligible cohorts, particularly pre-school children, those in at-risk groups, pregnant women, and frontline HSCWs - where it is important to highlight that uptake has been disappointing during the 2023/24 programme.
17. We are all aware of the pressures facing the health and social care system and therefore it is essential that we take all steps we can to help reduce future pressures by maximizing uptake of vaccine among staff – vaccination will protect the staff themselves, their families and their patients. A high Influenza vaccine uptake rate by staff will help maintain service capacity during a period of high demand.

Looking Ahead to the 2024/25 Influenza Season

18. Eligible cohorts for 'Flu vaccination are based on the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisations (JCVI). The programme works to provide direct protection to those who are at highest risk of influenza associated morbidity and mortality and to reduce transmission across all age groups through the vaccination of children.

2022 therefore direct comparisons cannot be made.

² Due to the introduction of the Encompass system on 9/11/23 data for areas within SEHSCT may be affected, and data is not included in figures collated by PHA. Uptake is representative of the four remaining HSCTs in Northern Ireland.

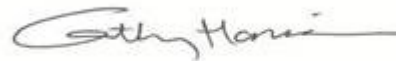
³ Surveillance definition of frontline based on data available in VMS is used for reporting purposes only.

19. The HSS Seasonal Influenza Policy letter for 2024/25 will be issued in due course and will include information on:
- Vaccination programme start date.
 - Eligible cohorts
 - Vaccine supply and ordering details.
 - Detail on Health and Social Care Workers
 - Recommended vaccines for 2024/25
20. The annual 'Flu immunisation programme is a critical element of the system-wide approach for delivering robust and resilient health and care services during the Autumn and Winter periods. It will help to reduce GP/primary care consultations, unplanned hospital admissions, pressure on Emergency Departments and will reduce staff sickness levels..
21. We are acutely aware of the pressures across the HSC system at present. It is more important than ever that the Department, PHA, HSC organisations, GPs and primary care teams as well as Community Pharmacies build on the experiences gained from this past year's vaccination programmes in order to continue to deliver an effective high quality service and to protect the health of the population in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer



Cathy Harrison
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

Circulation List

Director of Public Health/Medical Director, Public Health Agency (*for onward distribution to all relevant health protection staff*)
Assistant Director Public Health (Health Protection), Public Health Agency
Director of Nursing, Public Health Agency
Assistant Director of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, SPPG (*for onward distribution to Community Pharmacies*)
Directors of Pharmacy HSC Trusts
Director of Social Care and Children, SPPG
Family Practitioner Service Leads, SPPG (*for cascade to GP Out of Hours services*)
Medical Directors, HSC Trusts (*for onward distribution to all Consultants, Occupational Health Physicians and School Medical Leads*)
Nursing Directors, HSC Trusts (*for onward distribution to all Community Nurses, and Midwives*)
Directors of Children's Services, HSC Trusts

