Covid-19 and Flu Vaccination: Your Questions Answered

Both the flu and Covid-19 viruses will be in circulation, this winter. Vaccination provides the best possible protection against both illnesses for you, the people you care for and your loved ones. Here are some answers to key questions our vaccinators have been asked about both vaccines.

1. **How do the Covid-19 and flu vaccines work?**

The Covid-19 and flu vaccines work in the same way all vaccines do: by sending a signal to your immune system to create the antibodies that will fight the virus. Once your immune system knows how to fight disease, it can protect you in the event of exposure. Vaccines do not change your DNA and neither vaccine contains any live virus.

Getting a vaccine is a much faster, safer and more reliable way for your immune system to learn how to create the antibodies required to protect you from a disease, rather than catching the disease or virus itself.

2. **I've already had two or three Covid vaccinations and I had my flu vaccine last year. Why do I need to have more vaccinations?**

The protection provided by the flu and Covid-19 vaccines reduces over time for everyone, and both viruses are good at evolving into new variants that spread in different ways. We overcome this by asking the people at highest risk from a Covid-19 or flu infection to 'boost' their immunity with additional vaccinations.

For Covid-19, the main course of vaccinations for people over 18 is three doses – first, second and booster. If you are older, pregnant or have a health condition that means you are more at risk from a coronavirus infection, you will be offered additional Covid-19 booster vaccinations if you are eligible to provide you with the greatest possible protection.

For flu, people who are most at-risk are asked to get a seasonal flu vaccine once a year. This annual vaccine is designed to protect against the most recent strain of flu virus that is in circulation.

3. **The vaccines don't work. People still catch flu and Covid-19 after being vaccinated.**

It's true that the flu and Covid-19 vaccines will not stop you from catching the viruses, particularly as both are very good at evolving. However, being vaccinated greatly reduces the chance of you becoming seriously ill, hospitalised or dying from either infection.

4. **Life has gone back to normal. Why am I still being asked to have a Covid-19 vaccine?**

Now that Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted, it may appear that Covid-19 has gone away. But, one of the main reasons life has returned to normal in England is because so many people have

been vaccinated, particularly those at highest risk from a Covid infection, such as the elderly and people with underlying health conditions.

In England, our high levels of vaccination mean that the Omicron variant of Covid-19 is considered mild, but this same variant has caused thousands of deaths among unvaccinated elderly people in other countries such as Hong Kong.[1]

We shouldn't forget how devastating the Covid-19 pandemic was. In the UK there were 203,158 deaths involving Covid between March 2020 and August 2022 and 1.8m people developed Long Covid. In the year from March 2020 until March 2021, before Covid vaccination became widespread, UK death rates were 21% higher than the previous five-year average[2]. We cannot afford to be complacent about this virus.

5. I've had a Covid-19 infection. Why do I need to have a vaccine?

If you are unwell with Covid-19, your immune system may produce anti-bodies that provide some protection. But the level of immunity triggered by an infection is unpredictable. For some people it might be high, while others are left with little immunity and may catch Covid, again.

The type of immune response made by your body after having a Covid vaccine is much stronger and more reliable than the response from being unwell with the virus.

Another consideration is that the protection provided by a Covid-19 vaccine or infection reduces over time, so it is important to top up your body's defences with additional doses.

6. I'm worried that the Covid-19 vaccine will affect my fertility or sexual performance.

There is false information that the Covid-19 vaccines might affect peoples' fertility, sex drive or sexual performance. The Covid vaccine will not affect your ability to become pregnant, does not affect the quality of your sperm, and will not alter your sex drive or your ability to sustain an erection.

Like all vaccines, the Covid-19 vaccinations send a signal to your immune system to create the antibodies that will recognise and fight the virus. They do not contain any ingredients that would affect your fertility or your sexual performance, and the vaccine ingredients leave your body within a few days.

7. I'm pregnant or breastfeeding. Will the Covid-19 vaccine harm my baby and how many vaccines do I need?

If you are pregnant, it is very important that you have all the Covid-19 vaccinations recommended during pregnancy, including any additional boosters, even if you are fit, healthy

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[1] The British Medical Journal: How Hong Kong's vaccination missteps led to the world's highest covid-19 death rate
[2] Office for National Statistics: Coronavirus (COVID-19) latest insights

and up to date with all the other Covid vaccines you are entitled to. It is safe to have the Covid vaccine at any stage of your pregnancy.

The ingredients from the vaccine cannot cross into your placenta, they leave your body after a few days after sending a signal to your immune system to create the antibodies that will recognise and fight the virus.

As with all vaccines, including flu, studies[3] have shown that protective antibodies developed from Covid vaccination can transfer from mother to baby across the placenta, and after birth through breast milk, helping with the baby's immunity for the first few months of their lives.[4]

8. I'm worried about side effects of the Covid-19 and flu vaccines. What should I expect?

Common side effects are much less serious than developing coronavirus or flu or the complications associated with each virus, and they usually go away within a few days. If your side effects seem to get worse or if you're concerned, call or click NHS 111. If you do seek advice from a health professional, make sure you tell them about your vaccination so that they can assess you properly.

Everyone is different, so the side effects you may experience (if you get any at all) will depend on which vaccine you receive, whether it's your first or second dose and you as an individual. Common side effects include:

- Having a painful, heavy feeling and tenderness in the arm where you had your injection
- Headache or muscle ache
- Chills
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Feeling tired
- Fever (temperature above 37.8°C)
- Joint pain

You may also have flu-like symptoms with episodes of shivering and shaking for a day or two.

There are simple things you can do to ease symptoms, such as taking painkillers like paracetamol.

After having the Covid vaccine, some people may experience changes to their menstruation. These changes are usually small compared with variations that happen naturally during the menstrual cycle, and quickly reverse.[5]

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[3] American Medical Association: Assessment of Maternal and Neonatal Cord Blood SARS-CoV-2 Antibodies and Placental Transfer Ratios
[4] Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists: Vaccination
[5] Imperial College London: COVID vaccination impact on menstrual cycle appears to be small and short lived

It's important to note that regardless of whether you experience side effects or not, you will still be benefitting from the protection of the vaccines. Even if you do experience side effects after the Covid-19 vaccine, we advise you get all recommended doses. The full recommended course will give you, and others, the best protection against the virus.

9. If I have the flu and Covid-19 vaccination at the same time, will my side-effects be worse?

If you are entitled to have both the flu and a Covid-19 booster, you may be offered the vaccinations at the same time (they will be given in different arms).

Side effects are not worse when you have the flu and Covid-19 vaccines at the same time, and many people prefer to have the vaccinations together to limit the time they may experience any side effects.

10. The Covid-19 vaccine was developed too quickly. How do I know it's safe?

All the Covid-19 vaccines used in the UK have been through the same three stages of clinical trials that every vaccine goes through.

They were tested on tens of thousands of people around the world and to speed up development of Covid-19 vaccines, the three trial phases were organised to overlap. Production of promising vaccines also started before the trials ended, which helped speed up delivery time.

No corners were cut in trialling the vaccines and ensuring they met strict standards of safety and effectiveness. Billions of people have been vaccinated against Covid-19.

11. I'm not at risk from Covid-19 or flu. Why should I be vaccinated?

While it is true that most people who get a Covid-19 or flu infection are able to recover, both viruses are unpredictable in how they affect people and even young, healthy people can become very unwell or die from both viruses.

Some people also develop severe complications from Covid-19. 2 million people in the UK are living with Long Covid[6], where Covid symptoms are still present more than four weeks after infection. Because the disease can damage the lungs, heart and brain, it may also cause long-term health problems that experts are still working to understand.

There's another reason to consider getting both vaccines: they protect those around you. Even if you don't become very unwell from flu or Covid-19, you could pass the viruses on to someone else who might be more severely affected.

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[6] The Guardian: Two million people in UK living with long Covid, find studies | Long Covid

12. Do I need to have both the flu and Covid-19 vaccine?

Yes. If you're entitled to a flu vaccine it's important to have it as well as any Covid-19 vaccinations you are offered. The flu and Covid-19 vaccines provide protection against two different infections which can both be very serious, particularly for people at higher risk.

13. Do the vaccines contain pork?

There is no content of animal origin in the Covid-19 vaccination and the British Islamic Medical Council and the Muslim Council of Great Britain have recommended that the Muslim community take the opportunity to receive the Covid-19 vaccination when offered, in line with Sharia Law.

The injectable flu vaccine that the NHS offers to adults contains no pork gelatine elements.

The nasal flu vaccine for children does contain tiny quantities of pork gelatine. Parents or carers who have religious objections to nasal flu vaccine can request an injectable flu vaccine for their children.

14. I'm worried about having the injection, not the vaccine. Is support available?

Many people fear injections to some extent. It's completely normal and our vaccinators are very used to it – please don't feel embarrassed.

If you are worried about having your injection, let someone know when you arrive for your vaccination. They are trained to help people who are apprehensive, nervous or anxious and can provide you with extra support.

Most people who are nervous and go on to have the vaccine say that they didn't feel the injection.

15. What if faint or panic when I have my vaccination?

Please don't feel worried or embarrassed. These types of responses are common and our vaccinators are trained to support people who need extra help to be vaccinated. If you are worried about having your vaccine and have fainted or felt anxious when having an injection, in the past, please let someone at the clinic know when you arrive for your vaccination.

For more information about Covid-19 and flu vaccination, including eligibility and how to get the seasonal vaccines you're entitled to, please visit www.grabajab.net