



Influenza

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are: rapid onset of fever, shivering, headache, muscle aches and a cough. 'Flu causes a much more severe illness than the common cold: a cold doesn't cause fever or muscle aches. People with 'flu can feel very ill indeed, often resulting in several days of being confined to bed. Most people recover easily, but would have much preferred to avoid the experience altogether, which is where the 'flu vaccine comes in. For some people, 'flu can cause more serious complications, like bronchitis and pneumonia. This can be potentially life-threatening in the elderly, asthmatics and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

Why vaccinate?

'Flu vaccine can reduce illness during the winter. In the UK, attitudes to 'flu are muddled by the fact that the vaccine is only offered free of charge to elderly or especially vulnerable people. In other countries, the situation is different. In the USA for example, annual vaccination for healthy working adults is very much a routine: in 2004 many Americans travelled to Canada or the UK to be vaccinated because of a serious vaccine shortage in the USA. 'Flu vaccination is widely regarded as an important health benefit. Key workers, highly paid staff, those working in direct contact with the general public or in public places, staff in large open plan offices (ie sharing the same air) and staff who simply have caring employers, are among those generally offered a free vaccination in the workplace. While there is certainly a benefit to employers in helping staff stay healthy, don't forget that 'flu vaccination protects your leisure time and your family as well, and not just your ability to work. Remember, the 'flu season begins at Christmas, and ends around the Easter break.

The benefits

The benefits of vaccination to healthy, working adults and their employers are well established: vaccination cuts the risk of 'flu by approximately 70-80%, and reduces time off work from colds and 'flu by forty three per cent. Each winter, up to one third of British adults may suffer from 'flu, and one third of sufferers becomes ill enough to visit their doctor. For companies and organisations, the potential benefits are even greater than the benefits to the individual: respiratory viruses can spread easily within any large group of people working together and sharing facilities on the same site. It is to everyone's advantage that as many people as possible within the same organisation should be protected.