

## **Q & A - Flu immunisation programme for people who work in close contact with poultry**

The Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety (DHSSPS) is offering free flu vaccination this winter to all those who work in close contact with poultry in registered premises. This is being done as a precautionary public health measure and does not mean that workers are at any higher risk of getting flu this winter than usual. Nor does it mean that there is an increased risk of an outbreak of bird flu in the UK as this risk remains low. Nevertheless, experts have recommended that this precautionary measure be taken now for the reasons set out below.

### **Why are workers being offered a flu vaccine?**

Working in close contact with poultry means that there is a slight risk that workers could catch the bird flu virus if an outbreak of avian (bird) flu were to occur. If they were also infected with human flu at the same time, the bird and human flu viruses could mix in their body to make a new flu virus. A new flu virus produced in this way could potentially be very infectious and cause serious illness in other people as they would not have any immunity to a new virus. Flu vaccine is being offered to eliminate this slight risk of having both flu and bird flu at the same time. A public health risk assessment found that only workers undertaking certain activities in registered poultry premises were at increased risk. Those not undertaking these activities or working with smaller flocks are not considered to be at increased risk.

### **Does flu vaccine protect against bird flu?**

No. Flu vaccine will not protect against bird flu.

### **What is the risk of a new flu virus emerging?**

We do not know. We do know that flu viruses readily mix and change to produce new viruses but we do not know to what extent this happens between bird and human flu viruses. DHSSPS already has a policy to offer flu vaccine to all those exposed to bird flu when an outbreak occurs. Having people who work with poultry vaccinated ahead of any outbreak will provide an extra safeguard.

### **Is it compulsory for poultry workers to be vaccinated?**

No. It is being offered free of charge and will help protect workers from catching and spreading ordinary human flu.

### **When can workers have the flu vaccine?**

Now, unless there are medical reasons they should not such as if they are generally unwell or have a fever (39° and above), in which case they should wait until they are better. Minor coughs and colds are not a reason to delay vaccination.

If workers have already had a flu jab this winter, it is not necessary to have another one until next autumn. Flu vaccines are changed each year to keep them effective against the viruses that circulate naturally. But if they have already had a bout of flu this winter they will still need the vaccine because there are several different types of flu viruses.

### **Can the flu vaccine cause flu?**

No, it cannot cause flu.

### **Will there be any side effects?**

Some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards, and the arm may feel a bit sore where it has been injected. These slight effects do not indicate any infection with flu. Any other reactions are very rare.

### **Are there any reasons why flu vaccine should not be given?**

People should not be vaccinated if they:

- are allergic to hens' eggs
- have had a severe reaction to flu vaccine in the past
- are currently unwell. They can have the vaccine when they are better
- have already had a flu jab this winter – but should have it again next winter.

### **Can pregnant women have the vaccine?**

There is no evidence of risk from vaccinating pregnant women, or those who are breast-feeding, with flu vaccine but they should mention that they are pregnant when making the appointment.

### **How can people avoid getting bird flu?**

Remember, the flu vaccine does not protect against bird flu. The slight risk of becoming infected can be reduced by following health and safety guidance for working with poultry and by making sure simple hygiene measures whilst at work are followed. Advice is available on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety website [www.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development website [www.dardni.gov.uk](http://www.dardni.gov.uk) or the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland website [www.hseni.gov.uk](http://www.hseni.gov.uk).

### **Key Facts**

- Avian or Bird flu is primarily a disease of birds caused by bird flu viruses
- There are many different types of bird flu viruses and each differs in its ability to cause disease in birds and people

- People can become infected through close contact with diseased poultry. However, infection in people is rare even in those who are directly exposed to the virus because the virus does not pass easily from birds to people
- The symptoms of bird flu in a person are usually mild flu-like symptoms and mild conjunctivitis (sore eyes with a discharge). Bird flu virus type H5N1 seems to differ from other bird flu types in its ability to cause serious illness with a high death rate in people. To date, there have been no human cases of H5N1 in the UK
- Bird flu can be treated with an antiviral medicine.