

Patient Information Leaflet on the Flu Vaccine for Adults with a Diagnosis of Cancer or who are receiving Cancer Treatment

Why should I get the flu vaccine?

Cancer or cancer treatments can weaken your ability to fight infection. This can make you more likely to catch the flu. If you do get the flu, it means you are more likely to get seriously ill. You are also more likely to get pneumonia and need to go to hospital. Getting the flu vaccine helps to ensure you do not catch the flu.

When should I get the flu vaccine?

The best time to get the flu vaccine is up to 2 weeks before starting cancer treatment. This is to allow time for your body to produce antibodies which help protect against the flu virus. If you have already started treatment, get the flu vaccine just before your next cycle of chemotherapy or within a couple of days afterwards. Vaccines given after you have started treatment may not work as well. If you get the flu vaccine while you are on chemotherapy, you will need a second dose of the vaccine 4 weeks after you finish treatment.

You can get your vaccine at any point during radiotherapy treatment.

Is it safe to go to your GP (doctor) or pharmacist to get the flu vaccine during COVID-19?

Yes. GPs (doctors) and pharmacists follow HSE COVID-19 guidance to prevent transmission of infection and to keep you safe when you visit them.

Is it safe to get the flu vaccine while on chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

Yes, the majority of people on chemotherapy or radiotherapy can have the flu vaccine. There are very few exceptions.

People on certain combination immunotherapy (called combination checkpoint inhibitors, for example, ipilimumab plus nivolumab) should not have the flu vaccine. If you are on immunotherapy, you should discuss the flu vaccine with your oncologist or haematologist before getting it.

If you have a very low white blood cell count (neutropenia), your doctor may also tell you to wait to get the flu vaccine until your white cell count recovers. If you have a very low platelet count, you should also talk to your doctor before getting the flu vaccine.

If you have had a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to a previous flu vaccine, or any part of the vaccine in the past, you should not get the flu vaccine.

Will the flu vaccine give me the flu?

No. The flu vaccine doesn't contain live flu virus so it can't give you the flu.

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

No. Side effects may include soreness at the vaccination site and, less commonly, a slight fever and aching muscles for a couple of days after the vaccination.

Will the flu vaccine stop me getting flu?

Getting the flu vaccine is the best way to help protect yourself from getting the flu. It will not stop all flu viruses and the level of protection may vary. So it's not 100% effective and you may still get flu. But if you do get the flu after you have the vaccine, it's likely to be milder and you will recover more quickly.

Should my family have the flu vaccine?

Yes. Anyone else that lives with you should also have the flu vaccine to protect you. Carers who come in from outside your home to look after you should also get the flu vaccine.

Can children who are living with someone who is having treatment for cancer receive the nasal flu vaccine?

Yes they can. The nasal flu vaccine given to children is slightly different to the flu vaccine given to adults by injection. In theory, children can have very small amounts of the weakened virus in the nose for a few days after the nasal vaccine. This is still considered safe for almost everyone in the household. The only exception is if someone in the house is isolating after a stem cell or bone marrow transplant. They are isolating while their immune system rebuilds. Children in the household should get the inactivated vaccine instead.

Are there any other vaccines that should be given to people having chemotherapy or radiotherapy?

Yes. You should also have the pneumococcal vaccine, if you have not had it before. This will help protect you against septicaemia (blood poisoning), pneumonia and meningitis, which can be complications of catching flu. You should discuss this vaccination with your healthcare team first. They will tell you about the best time to get this vaccine. The pneumococcal vaccine is also available from your GP or pharmacist.

More information on flu vaccination is available at

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/pubinfo/flu-vaccination/about-the-vaccine/>