In this article...

- Why flu vaccination is important
- Reasons why health staff refuse vaccination
- Myths surrounding flu vaccination

In 2013, 55% of frontline NHS staff chose to have a flu vaccine. GP practice nurses were the most vaccinated staff group (65%) but 51% of all other qualified NHS nurses declined the offer of vaccination (Public Health England, 2014a). Nurses are at the forefront of delivering care in the NHS, so it is surprising that nurse flu vaccination uptake is below the average.

Flu vaccination is recommended for healthcare workers directly involved in patient care, and it is the responsibility of the employer to arrange and pay for this (Salisbury et al, 2014). Inconvenience may be a factor in some declining vaccination, but there are other reasons that are often based on myths.

Effects of flu

Flu can cause a range of mild-to-severe symptoms, and being in good health is no guarantee of protection. The symptoms usually last for one to two weeks and include a sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, myalgia and extreme fatigue (Box 1). The risk of serious illness from influenza is higher in children under six months, pregnant women, older people and those with underlying health conditions (Salisbury et al, 2014).

However, even previously healthy people can develop severe complications from influenza, including bronchitis, secondary bacterial pneumonia and, rarely, meningitis, encephalitis or death.

The impact of flu on the population varies each year, depending on how many people are susceptible, changes to the virus and the severity of the illness caused by the strain in circulation (Public Health England, 2013).

It is hard to predict the timing and severity of flu seasons and intermittent epidemics can cause significant illness and death. In the 2013/14 season it led to 904 admissions to intensive care units, and 10.8% of these patients died (Public Health England, 2014b).

Why vaccinate healthcare workers?

Frontline healthcare workers are more likely to be exposed to the flu virus, especially in winter, when some of their

Healthcare employees believe myths about flu vaccination that stop uptake at work
patients will be infected. It has been estimated that up to one in four could be infected with flu during a mild season - a much higher incidence than expected in the general population (Donaldson et al, 2009).

Some healthcare workers opt for vaccination to try to protect their family members, especially young children or other relatives in at-risk groups.

**Protecting patients**
Influenza is highly contagious and health-care workers may transmit the virus to patients even if they only have mild symptoms themselves, and some patients are extremely vulnerable to the effects of the virus (Salisbury et al, 2014). There have been reports of outbreaks in hospitals and other care settings that are likely to have been transmitted from healthcare workers to patients (Horcajada et al, 2003; Pachucki et al, 1989). One outbreak caused six infections in neonates and one death (Cunney et al, 2000).

**Why do staff decline vaccination?**
Research by NHS Employers’ flu fighter campaign found many reasons for staff declining the offer of the flu vaccine. Myths about the vaccine are often a factor. Table 1 lists some of these myths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Truth</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The flu jab gives you flu and I don’t have time to be ill</td>
<td>It is impossible to get flu from the flu vaccine, because the vaccine does not contain live viruses. A very small number of people experience side-effects such as soreness, swelling or aching muscles, but this is an immune response to the vaccine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influenza isn’t that dangerous</td>
<td>For the majority of people flu is only an unpleasant illness, but it can result in chest infections, severe complications and death. Globally, seasonal influenza accounts for three to five million cases of severe illness each year and 250,000-500,000 deaths (WHO, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had the vaccination last year so don’t need it again</td>
<td>The vaccine for seasonal flu can change each year, to help protect against circulating strains of the virus. This means that the vaccine administered last year might not protect against flu this year. The vaccine is also time-limited, so annual vaccination is recommended (NHS Employers et al, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The flu vaccination doesn’t work, so what’s the point?</td>
<td>The WHO (2014) says flu vaccination is the most effective way to prevent infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am fit and healthy, so I don’t need the vaccination</td>
<td>Healthy people can develop severe complications as a consequence of flu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The infection control practices at my workplace are sufficient</td>
<td>Although good infection prevention and control practices are encouraged, they alone will not be sufficient to prevent influenza infection (NHS Employers et al, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m pregnant, so I can’t have the vaccination</td>
<td>Pregnant women can have the vaccination at any stage of their pregnancy. Having the vaccination when pregnant is beneficial and helps protect the baby from flu in the first few months of life (NHS Employers et al, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have an egg allergy, so I can’t have the vaccine</td>
<td>Egg allergy is a contraindication for receiving most flu vaccines, as it is propagated in fertilised hens’ eggs. However, egg-free vaccines are available, so you can still get your flu vaccination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NHS Employers’ flu fighter campaign

**Getting involved in flu fighter**
Flu fighter offers tools to help NHS organisations increase vaccine uptake, including:
- How to run and evaluate campaigns;
- Toolkits with helpful facts;
- Printed campaign materials (posters, stickers and leaflets);
- Digital materials;
- The “jab-o-meter” – a visual tool to help communicate uptake figures;
- Case studies that share ideas of how to improve flu vaccination uptake.

There is no single way to run a local flu fighter campaign. The annual flu fighter awards showcases examples that have sought to raise local awareness. There is always work behind the scenes to make vaccinations convenient and follow good practice, and liaison with key staff groups, such as those in occupational health.

Last year, the flu fighter campaign ran in Wales for the first time. Staff vaccination uptake in Wales for the 2013/14 season was 49.6%, up from 35.5% the previous season.

**Conclusion**
Influenza is highly contagious, and healthcare workers may transmit the virus to patients, even if symptoms are mild or not noticeable. Their duty of care to patients includes taking precautions to protect them from communicable diseases.

**References**

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