

Briefing From DH Media Centre

Swine Flu – 19 November (3.00pm)

For release to government departments and swine flu stakeholders

The Department of Health held its regular swine flu press briefing today, with the Chief Medical Officer. We also announced the second phase of our swine flu vaccination programme, to immunise children between 6 months and 5 years and essential carers of at risk groups.

Presentation summary: CMO

- Further small down turn in number of weekly GP consultations for swine flu.
- Health Protection Agency estimated 53,000 new cases range 26,00 -114,000.
- 715,000 estimated total number of cases.
- GP data, daily data – slight increase.
- Heart of Birmingham NHS still highest level of infection with influenza like illness.
- Increase of influenza like illness in younger age groups after half-term
- National Pandemic Flu Service slight upturn in use.
- School outbreaks – Yorkshire and Humber still highest numbers.
- Hospitalisations – 783 total hospitalisations, 183 in critical care.
- Under 5 year olds highest number of hospitalisations.
- Under 5 year olds highest number in critical care.
- Paediatric intensive care – East Anglia 41% occupancy – overall high occupancy in intensive care.
- 40 patients received ECMO (extracorporeal membrane oxygenation).
- Deaths – 142 total deaths England; 18 in last week; 21 Wales; 38 Scotland; 13 Northern Ireland, total 214 deaths
- Age distribution – majority in under 44
- Underlying conditions no change 1/5 previously healthy people
- 7 deaths north east; 13 Yorkshire & Humber; 6 East midlands; 45 London; 6 SEC; 5 SC; 8 SW; 23 West Midlands; 21 North West = patients who died in region hospital where treated
- International scene – US shown further down = big jump in children deaths
- Pregnant women admitted to hospitals with suspected swine flu = 65 cases investigated to date – 18% were admitted to intensive care

SWINE FLU VACCINATION: NHS PREPARES NEXT STEP

Children over six months and under five years will be offered vaccine

The swine flu vaccination programme will be extended to offer children over six months and under five protection against the virus.

Extending the vaccination programme to young children is supported by the panel of experts that provide advice on vaccination issues - the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

Children under five years of age are more likely than other groups to be hospitalised if they become ill with swine flu. Young children also have high rates of admission to critical care and, sadly, there have been some deaths.

Vaccination of people in clinical risk groups is well under way, with more than seven million doses of vaccine already distributed. Vaccinating these groups remains a priority to protect those at greatest risk from swine flu.

We are working with the BMA and NHS organisations to agree the details of how vaccine will be delivered, so that young children can be offered the vaccine once GPs complete the vaccination of priority groups.

Parents of children who are over six months and under five years should wait to be contacted by their local surgery.

Chief Medical Officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, said:

“Our first priority is to ensure that people with clinical risk factors, and frontline health and social care staff are vaccinated.

“Protecting those most at risk from the disease will reduce the levels of serious illness, and deaths. That’s why we will shortly offer the vaccine to young children.

“Vaccination remains a personal choice, but I urge everyone who is offered the vaccine to accept it and protect themselves. While the risks of serious complications from ‘flu may be small, the impact on those affected can be devastating.”

Director of Immunisation, Professor David Salisbury, said:

“This is the first pandemic for which we’ve had a vaccine to protect people.

“Our phased approach to vaccine delivery is intended to focus on those most at risk and to use vaccine stocks responsibly.”

Professor Steve Field, Chairman of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said:

“We shouldn’t underestimate swine flu – it is a nasty infection and its effects can be devastating. I know that some parents have concerns about immunisation but the swine flu vaccine is our most effective protection against the virus. This is obviously a personal choice but I would advise all parents whose children are offered the vaccine to take it up. If you are worried, please talk to your GP and get all the information so that you can make an informed choice.”

Notes to editors

1. Children over 6 months and under 5 who are in a clinical risk group are already being offered the vaccine as part of the first phase of the vaccination programme.

2. Population estimates for this age group: there are 3,214,650 6 months to <5 years in the UK and 2,718,150 in England (including those in at-risk groups). There are 3,064,500 6 month to <5 years old in the UK **not in risk groups** and 2,591,200 in England **not in risk groups**.

3. JCVI also advised that main carers for elderly or disabled people should be encouraged to take up vaccination. This is to protect the welfare of those being cared for who may be at risk if their carer falls ill. We will discuss the implementation of this advice with carers’ organisations, including a number of practical questions, such as how to identify the carers involved. According to the National Audit Office: "There are six million unpaid carers in the UK who look after relatives, friends, children or older people who are sick or disabled."

4. Links to JCVI guidance can be found here:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/ab/JCVI/DH_107556

http://www.dh.gov.uk/ab/JCVI/DH_094744

5. For media enquiries only, please call the Department of Health newsdesk on 020 7210 5221. For all other enquiries, please contact the customer service centre on 020 7210 4850.

6. Questions and answers:

What vaccine will be given?

The GSK vaccine Pandemrix will be offered except to those with a confirmed anaphylactic reaction to eggs who will be offered Celvapan.

Will the programme be extended further?

The Department will keep this under review, taking advice from the JCVI.

Science Media Centre Support

Expert reaction to roll-out of swine flu vaccine to healthy children aged between 6 months and 5 years

Dr David Elliman, Consultant in Community Child Health at Great Ormond Street Hospital, said:

"There is a lot of logic to this. The hospital admission rate in this group is particularly high and of course they have no previous exposure, unlike the elderly who have a certain degree of protection without vaccination. It seems a sensible next step."

Professor Robert Dingwall, formerly Director of the Institute for Science and Society at the University of Nottingham, said:

"This is a logical extension of the vaccination programme, and a good example of the considered approach being taken by the UK government. You cannot give 60 million people a vaccination all at once so an approach that progressively brings in different groups, reflecting their relative risk and benefit, helps to manage the workload for GPs, while ensuring that the population is increasingly protected. It is also a responsible use of public funds in that decisions can be made at each point about whether there is sufficient clinical evidence to justify vaccinating additional groups. This means that vaccines are not wasted and that GPs do not spend more time than necessary on this work at the expense of their commitments to other patients and their illnesses."