



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m2990<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2990>

Published: 24 July 2020

## Covid-19: GPs raise workload concerns as government extends flu vaccination programme

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The influenza vaccination programme will be expanded in the UK this winter to help reduce pressure on the NHS, the government has announced.

The programme will now include people aged 50 to 64 and all school year groups up to year 7. People who are on the shielded patient list and members of their household will also be offered the vaccine, as well as those aged under 2 with pre-existing conditions that put them at risk. Previously, the flu vaccine was routinely offered to people over 65, those in clinical risk groups, pregnant women, children aged 2 to 10, and healthcare workers.

In 2019-20, says Public Health England, 15 million people were vaccinated against flu. The government has said that the new expansion will lead to more than 30 million people being vaccinated against it this winter.

### Backlog and supply

However, GPs have raised concerns over the additional pressure this will put on their practices as they try to tackle the expected backlog of patients caused by covid-19, as well as the availability of vaccine stock.

In the announcement the government said that, once vaccination of the most “at risk” groups was well under way, the Department of Health and Social Care would “work with clinicians to decide when to open the programme to invite people aged 50 to 64.”

Nikki Kanani, GP and NHS medical director for primary care, said, “Getting a free NHS flu vaccination is a quick and simple way that people can help to save lives and reduce pressure on our hardworking frontline staff this winter.

“GPs, nurses, community pharmacists, and others will be going to great lengths this year to give this vital protection to millions more people in a safe and convenient way, so when the time comes I would urge everyone invited for a flu vaccination to get it as soon as possible.”

Martin Marshall, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said that the expansion was “sensible” but that more details were needed to ensure that GPs could carry out the work while also coping with covid-19.

He said, “Practices plan meticulously for the flu season every year to ensure the vaccination programme runs smoothly and as many people as possible get vaccinated—they will have made their orders at the beginning of the year and will need to amend these. We also need assurance that the government can guarantee adequate supply for everyone covered under the extension.”

Marshall added that measures would be needed to ensure that all patients, especially those at risk, were safe when they came to get their vaccination.

Steve Kell, GP partner at Larwood Health Partnership in Nottinghamshire, said that delivering the expanded vaccination programme would be a significant challenge for GPs. He said, “We can’t deliver ‘the biggest flu programme ever’ and do routine reviews, meet the quality and outcomes framework targets, do minor surgery, meet care quality commission requirements, and [also] deal with covid-19 and flu.”

He added that GPs had already put in their orders for flu vaccine stock and that “recent feedback was that we would be unable to order more. Now we’re trying to find out if we can.”