Frequently asked questions about flu (influenza) and flu vaccinations

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1  What is the situation this year?
The COVID-19 pandemic is not over and at the moment it is impossible to accurately predict how it will evolve this autumn and winter.
In the winter of 2020/21, the usual seasonal flu was virtually absent in the northern hemisphere owing to the measures taken against the pandemic, and there was no flu epidemic. The measures put in place in the winter of 2021/22 were gradually eased in March 2022, which subsequently led to a delayed flu epidemic of moderate intensity in the spring.
The evolution of the flu season will be mainly influenced by the situation, the climate and any COVID-19 measures. It is therefore almost impossible to predict how the coming wave of flu will evolve.
However, national and international experts think an earlier, more rapid and more severe flu season than 2019 is possible. The general recommendations on hygiene and social distancing and the flu vaccine will help reduce the disease burden this winter. In particular, the flu vaccination prevents severe cases of flu and hospitalisation in people with a higher risk of complications. This relieves pressure on the health system – especially on intensive care beds in hospitals, but also on healthcare professionals, emergency departments and care homes.

2  Why is it a good idea to get a flu vaccination? (See also question 15)
Flu isn’t always harmless. Particularly in people at increased risk, it can lead to serious complications requiring hospitalisation, and sometimes even death. Many of these cases could be prevented with vaccination. The flu vaccination is the simplest preventive measure against flu complications. It is safe and well tolerated. The current hygiene and social distancing recommendations are also important preventive measures. They complement the vaccination but are no substitute for it. The flu vaccination provides protection against flu (influenza) but not against COVID-19 or other colds and viruses that are common in the winter months.

3  Who should get a flu vaccination?
The 2022 recommendations are the same as in previous years. We recommend the vaccination for people aged 65 or over, people from age six months with certain chronic conditions or low immunity, for pregnant women, and for children aged six months or over who were born prematurely (for the first two winters after the birth). We also recommend the vaccination for people who – in a professional or private capacity – have close and regular contact with the people described above with a higher risk of complications, or with infants aged under six months as they also have a higher risk of complications and cannot yet be vaccinated. Close contacts include, for example, children aged six months and over and adults who live in the same household as people in vulnerable groups, plus people who have contact with especially vulnerable people in the course of their work. This includes, for example, healthcare workers, those working in the paramedical field, as well as employees of creches, day care centres, care homes, facilities for people with disabilities, and personal assistants. Vaccinating close contacts also protects people in the vulnerable group.

4  How does Switzerland procure flu vaccines?
Apart from pandemic vaccines (e.g. against COVID-19), the vaccine market in Switzerland is subject to the market economy dictated by supply and demand.
The federal government does not purchase or procure any non-pandemic vaccines and therefore no vaccines against seasonal flu. One exception to this was at the height of the pandemic in 2020 as there were not yet any vaccines available against COVID-19, the federal government exceptionally agreed minimum supply quantities with manufacturers. This allowed the increased demand for flu vaccines to be met in the autumn of 2020 and helped prevent the health system from becoming overwhelmed.

5 How many vaccine doses are available this year?
The federal government does not expect a sharp increase in demand for flu vaccines in 2022 as the pandemic situation is no longer comparable with that of autumn 2020. According to the flu vaccine manufacturers, just under 1.4 million doses are available this autumn. By way of comparison, in pre-pandemic years there were between 1.0 and 1.3 million doses, while at the height of the pandemic in 2020, there were 1.9 million due to a sharp increase in demand.

6 Which flu vaccines are available for which age groups?
A table with an overview of the products authorised and available in Switzerland (in German, French and Italian) can be found on the website vaccinateagainsttheflu.ch/vaccines.

7 When should you get vaccinated?
The flu vaccination period runs from mid-October until the beginning of the flu season, which in Switzerland is usually in January. Even people who are vaccinated in November or early December have enough time for their body’s immune system to build immune protection.

This year's National Flu Vaccination Day will take place on Friday, 25 November. Once again, for a recommended flat charge of CHF 30, anyone interested can get vaccinated against seasonal flu at one of the participating medical practices or pharmacies offering vaccinations.

8 Should you get vaccinated against seasonal flu and COVID-19 at the same time?
The flu vaccination can in principle be administered with, before or after a COVID-19 vaccination. If they are given together – provided this is possible at the relevant vaccination location – one injection is administered in the left upper arm and the other in the right.

Getting the two vaccinations at the same time makes it easier to get protected against both diseases as you can receive both vaccines at the same vaccination appointment. Any adverse reactions to the two vaccinations may then occur together, including pain in both upper arms.

9 Does vaccination give people at especially high risk adequate protection against seasonal flu?
The more people in high-risks groups who have the vaccination the better. However, the efficacy of the vaccination is often somewhat reduced for people with a higher risk of complications compared with healthy, younger people. The flu vaccination is therefore also recommended for those who in the course of their work or in non-work settings have regular close contact with people in vulnerable groups. To complement vaccination, it is important to follow the hygiene and behavioural recommendations.

10 Which children should have the vaccination?
We recommend the vaccination for children aged six months and over who are themselves in a vulnerable group. For these children, the vaccination is covered by compulsory health insurance. But the vaccination should also be given to children who have regular close contact with people with an increased risk of flu complications, for example pregnant women, family members with chronic diseases and grandparents. In these cases, the fact that the children are protected by the vaccine also means people around them are protected.
11 Who pays for flu vaccinations?
For people at a greater risk of complications as per the FOPH vaccination recommendations, a flu vaccination administered at a medical practice or vaccination centre will be paid by their compulsory health insurance, provided they have already used up their annual deductible. If the vaccination is administered in a pharmacy, the cost of the vaccine will be covered provided that there is a medical prescription. The costs of administering the vaccine must be borne by the person being vaccinated. Other people wishing to be vaccinated must pay for the vaccination themselves. Many employers offer the vaccination to their employees free of charge.

12 Are there plans for a flu campaign?
This year’s flu prevention information is similar to previous years: there will be no flu vaccination 'campaign' as such. We provide plenty of information and materials for members of the public and health professionals on www.vaccinateagainsttheflu.ch. This year's National Flu Vaccination Day will take place on Friday 25 November. On that day, for a recommended flat charge of CHF 30 you can get vaccinated against flu, even without an appointment, at one of the participating medical surgeries or pharmacies offering vaccination.

13 What should I do if I have flu-like symptoms?
If you experience cold or flu symptoms, keep away from others and wear a mask. Or even better: stay at home. This way you prevent the disease from spreading further. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids and rest. Medicines for pain and fever can relieve the symptoms; ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice. The symptoms of COVID-19 may be similar to those of flu.

People aged 65 or over, pregnant women and people with a chronic illness should keep a close eye on their symptoms and contact their doctor immediately if they have any problems.

14 Why aren’t people tested for flu?
As opposed to COVID-19, there are few opportunities to be tested for influenza viruses in suspected cases of flu. However, under certain circumstances (e.g. hospitalisation), the doctor may order a flu test. In the current situation, people with flu-like symptoms should always be tested for coronavirus first to rule out a COVID-19 infection.

15 The efficacy of the flu vaccine is limited. Does it really make sense to get vaccinated? (See also question 2)
Depending on the flu season and population group, the flu vaccine is between 20% and 80% effective against infection or a mild case of the flu. On the other hand, the flu vaccination provides much better protection against serious complications of influenza. Especially in people with an increased risk of complications, influenza sometimes leads to severe complications that can be due to the flu virus itself or to a bacterial infection. Particularly in the upcoming winter, when we’ll be seeing COVID-19 and flu circulating at the same time, the flu vaccination will help to reduce the overall burden of disease.

For more information on flu, including the flu vaccination test, see: vaccinateagainsttheflu.ch