

Vaccination against A(H1N1) influenza, also called swine flu, now being offered to the general public

Members of the general public are now being offered the chance to be vaccinated against the new A(H1N1) influenza, also called swine flu. Initially the vaccine was reserved for those people at particular risk of complications and for medical staff. Vaccination is now being made available to the rest of the population. Each local authority is organising the vaccination scheme in its own area and will inform the public locally of how to proceed.

The vaccine, Pandemrix, has been approved by medicines authorities in Europe and Norway. This leaflet contains the answers to some key questions about the vaccine, who should be vaccinated first and why vaccination is recommended.

More information about the new A(H1N1) strain of influenza can be found at the health authorities' website www.pandemi.no. If you have any general questions you can also call the official pandemic helpline on 815 55 015.

Why are the authorities recommending that everyone be vaccinated against the new A(H1N1) flu?

Vaccination offers the best protection against the new A(H1N1) strain of influenza, also called swine flu. While most people who contract the virus will experience only mild symptoms, some people will become seriously ill. Experience shows that around one-third of those who become seriously ill in Norway and other countries do not belong to any previously known risk category. The health authorities are therefore recommending that everyone over the age of 6 months be vaccinated, apart from healthy women in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy (first trimester).

Vaccination will also help ensure that you don't pass the virus on to members of your family and others with whom you are in contact. All vaccination in Norway is voluntary.

Order of vaccination priority

As an overall principle vaccination of the youngest age groups will be given priority. If a local authority has less vaccine available than there is demand when general vaccination starts, it is recommended that the following groups be vaccinated first:

1. Members of the same household/close contacts of:
 - anyone in a risk category for which vaccination is not

recommended

- infants under the age of 6 months
- women in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy

2. Anyone who comes into close contact with herds of pigs

Do I still need to be vaccinated if I have already had flu?

Once you have had flu you will normally not catch the same strain again. Anyone who is not sure whether they have had the new A(H1N1) strain of flu should be vaccinated as a precaution. You do not need a vaccination if a laboratory test has confirmed that you have had the A(H1N1) strain of flu. However, it is not harmful to have the vaccine even if you have already had this kind of flu.

How is the vaccine produced?

Pandemrix is produced in the traditional way, by culturing the virus in eggs. The vaccine is produced using a portion of the new A(H1N1) virus. Since it does not contain any live virus it cannot give you the flu.

Is the vaccine safe?

Pandemrix has been approved throughout Europe, including by the Norwegian Medicines Agency. Approval is given on the basis of a thorough assessment of the vaccine's efficacy and safety.

All medicines can produce side effects. Pandemrix can result in a slightly stronger reaction, eg pain, tenderness and swelling around the site of the injection, than the vaccine against normal seasonal flu. Other common side effects, such as headache, fatigue and a raised temperature, are also slightly more common.

Since the vaccine is cultured in eggs, caution is advised with respect to those affected by severe egg allergy.

Rare side effects can only be discovered through general administration of the vaccine to large population groups. A comprehensive system to pick up on such side effects has been established both nationally and internationally.

Does the vaccine contain additives?

Since the vaccine is delivered in vials containing several doses, the preservative thiomersal, a mercury-containing compound with an antibacterial effect, is added to prevent the growth of bacteria in the vial once it has been opened. Thorough studies have been carried out on the use of thiomersal as an additive in vaccines in large population groups. These studies show no evidence that thiomersal in vaccines is harmful to health.

The vaccine also contains a blend of oils including squalene (a natural oil found in all plants and animals) and vitamin E. This blend of oils is added to boost the body's immune response to the vaccine.

Do I need to be vaccinated against normal seasonal flu and the new A(H1N1) influenza?

The pandemic vaccine and the vaccine against seasonal flu protect against different viruses. Some people will therefore be recommended to have both vaccines. They can be administered at the same time, one in each arm.

What will vaccination cost?

The cost of vaccination will vary depending on the local authority. The charge payable is not covered by the medical fee exemption card (blue prescription scheme and medical fees ceiling 1). This applies to both adults and children.

How is the vaccination administered?

The vaccination is administered through an injection in the upper arm. Small children are inoculated in the thigh. Children under the age of 10 are recommended to have two doses (both those belonging to risk categories and others), as are those whose immune system has been compromised. The two doses of the vaccine should be given at least three weeks apart. People over the age of 10 are initially being recommended to have one dose of the vaccine. The need for additional groups to receive a second dose of the vaccine will be assessed at a later date.

Take your 11-digit personal identity number with you when you go to be vaccinated. You will have to wait for 20 minutes after vaccination to make sure you do not suffer from any allergic reaction.

As all other vaccinations, being vaccinated against A(H1N1) flu is voluntary, and parents/guardians must give their assent to the vaccination of children under 16. Children over 12 years of age have the right to express their opinion, and parents/guardians must take the views of the child into account.