



## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **SWINE FLU OUTBREAK & VACCINATION**

Winter is the season for Influenza and a large variety of upper respiratory virus infections (collectively called FLU or “Flu Like Illness”). Of these, Influenza is by far the most serious disease but it is also the only one that can be prevented.

Influenza (Flu) is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. Different strains of virus circulate in different years, but for this season the overwhelmingly dominant strain is the Swine Flu (H1N1-2009) virus that caused the ‘swine flu’ pandemic last year. Unlike other Flu viruses, this virus is particularly severe on pregnant women, young people and people with certain pre-existing diseases. Treatment options for Influenza, once caught are limited, but the disease can be prevented by vaccination. Each year the three most commonly circulating viruses are identified in advance by the World Health Organisation and Seasonal Flu vaccines are produced that closely match them. This winter’s formulation includes the Swine Flu strain and provides protection against it.

The UK has been experiencing a sharp increase in Flu and FLI over the past six weeks. Currently, on average, over 10,000 new cases are being reported every day, of which about 60% are due to Swine Flu, which puts the outbreak at an epidemic level. In addition, 50 deaths have already been reported, most of them in persons who had not taken the vaccine. This includes two young pregnant women, who died shortly after giving birth.

Winter illness in Gibraltar generally follows UK patterns, although sometimes after a short lag period. In Gibraltar, GPs at the Primary Care Centre have reported increased workloads, but so far the laboratory has not detected swine flu.

The GHA obtained stocks of Seasonal Flu Vaccine (containing Swine Flu protection) and started offering it to high-risk groups of the public (see table) from October 2010. Just over half the stock has been used up to date. Stocks of the single Swine Flu vaccine are also available as a back-up.

<b>1) All persons aged 65 years or over.</b>
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<b>2) Persons aged between 6 months and 65 years, who meet these conditions:</b>		
	<u>Condition</u>	<u>Example</u>
	Persons who suffer from High Risk diseases	Severe Asthma Chest complaints, including bronchitis and emphysema A heart problem A kidney disease A liver disease A neurological condition, e.g. MS or cerebral palsy A stroke or a transient ischaemic attack (TIA) Diabetes
	Persons with lowered immunity due to disease or treatment	Steroid medication Cancer treatment Problem with the spleen (or have had the spleen removed).
	Pregnant women	Of any age and at any stage of pregnancy
	Main carer of frail person	Older or disabled person
	Front line health or social care worker	GHA employees Care Agency employees Other Doctors, Nurses, Dentists and Pharmacists.
	Handler of live animals	GONHS staff, veterinary staff and bird handlers

The GHA appeals to all persons meeting the above conditions, who have not already had the vaccine, to come forward and do so as soon as possible.

In particular, **pregnant women** who did not receive the swine flu vaccine last year should do so, as pregnant women are at an increased risk of severe disease and flu-related hospital admissions. The vaccine is safe. There are no known problems from giving the seasonal flu (or swine flu) vaccine to women who are pregnant at any stage of the pregnancy.

It is vital that **children** who suffer from high risk diseases or those who have lowered immunity should receive the seasonal flu vaccination. These children are more likely to become seriously ill if they catch swine flu, and it could make their existing condition worse. Seasonal flu vaccine can be given at the same time as routine childhood vaccines. Children with immunological problems who did not get the swine flu vaccine last year will need an accelerated programme.

The Flu vaccine is available at the Primary Care Centre (Blood Clinic), from Monday to Fridays between 2pm and 4pm. For further details the Primary Care Centre should be contacted on 20070143 ext. 3210 or 20072355.