

# Employee vaccination: flu

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## Executive summary

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Health Council of the Netherlands

Vaccinating employees can help protect them against disease when they are exposed to viruses and bacteria in the course of their work. Sometimes the employees themselves do not face a particularly high risk, but they can infect others with whom they come into contact in the course of their work or their lives, such as vulnerable patients or young children. Vaccination may provide a solution in this situation too. The Health Council has developed two assessment frameworks to decide whether to recommend employee vaccination. Using these frameworks, the Subcommittee Vaccination of Employees has assessed whether vaccination against the flu (influenza) should be offered to employees.

The flu is a common infectious disease caused by the influenza virus. For most people, catching the flu is not serious, but it can be serious for people in high-risk groups. These people are offered vaccination against the flu through the National Influenza Prevention Programme (NPG). Based on the state of scientific

knowledge and its expert judgement, the Subcommittee Vaccination of Employees has identified three groups of employees who, due to the circumstances in their workplace or the nature of their work, are also eligible for flu vaccination.

The first group for whom vaccination against the flu is recommended is healthcare personnel who have direct contact with patients. Scientific research shows that the risk of exposure to the flu virus and the resulting disease is higher among healthcare personnel than in the general population. Furthermore, healthcare personnel who have direct contact with patients can transfer the virus to others. Vaccination can reduce both the occurrence of the flu among healthcare personnel and its transfer to patients. Some analyses show that the vaccination of healthcare personnel can result in fewer cases of pneumonia and even fewer deaths among patients. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that vaccination against the flu be offered to healthcare personnel, both for their

own protection and for the protection of third parties, with the protection of vulnerable third parties being an important factor for the Committee.

The second group of employees who the Committee believes are at a greater risk of flu infection are employees who frequently come into close contact with third parties in a relatively confined space. According to the scientific literature, people who work in public transport have an increased risk of hospitalisation as a result of the flu. There are also indications of an increased flu risk for employees in education and childcare. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that employees who frequently come into close contact with third parties in a relatively confined space be offered vaccination against the flu for their own protection. In this respect, the Committee notes that multiple factors play a role in vaccination decisions. As well as the size of the space, other factors include the possibility of adequate ventilation, and the duration, frequency, amount and

intensity of contact. Because of this variety of factors, the Committee cannot make a general statement about offering vaccination to this group of employees. It is up to the employer to assess whether to offer vaccination, after taking advice from an occupational hygienist or company doctor. For some categories of employees in this group, such as drivers who transport vulnerable persons, and barbers and hairdressers who work in nursing homes, the Committee also considers the protection of vulnerable third parties to be a reason for vaccination.

The third group for whom the Committee considers flu vaccination is recommended is employees who could be exposed to the flu virus itself through ‘targeted work’. This includes laboratory employees involved in vaccine production and employees in diagnostic laboratories. In spite of the stringent containment and other measures with which they must comply due to the nature of their work, they may still face a greater risk of exposure and disease.

There is no scientific data on this topic. Based on its expert judgement, the Committee recommends that vaccination be offered to this group of employees, for their own protection.

Finally, there is another group of employees for whom the reason for vaccination is not to protect themselves or third parties, but to prevent the emergence of a new flu virus. If a person is simultaneously infected with a human flu virus and bird flu, the exchange of genetic information between the two viruses can cause a new virus to emerge. In 2022, the Expert Committee on Zoonoses of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) recommended to the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport that people who are at a high risk of exposure to bird flu be vaccinated against seasonal flu. The Committee considers that the vaccination of employees to prevent zoonoses falls outside its remit, but endorses the importance of the recommendation, particularly given the increase in bird flu in our country in recent years. The Minister has accepted the

recommendation of the Expert Committee. The policy will be shaped under the *National Action Plan to Strengthen Zoonosis Policy*.

The Health Council has previously concluded that flu vaccination is sufficiently safe for various risk groups and age groups. The Committee considers that this conclusion also applies to the vaccination of employees. In this regard, they note that the efficacy and effectiveness of the available vaccines against flu is not optimal. The match between the vaccine and the circulating flu viruses is better in some years than others. Because even vaccinated employees can become infected and spread the virus, in addition to vaccination occupational hygiene measures are also important, such as limiting exposure (by ensuring sick employees stay home), cleaning surfaces, good ventilation, hand and coughing hygiene and the use of personal protective equipment.

Finally, the Committee notes that the relatively low number of flu cases in the past two years

was probably a result of the measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus. With the relaxation of these restrictive measures, the flu will probably once again play an important role, as has already been seen in the recent flu epidemics in the spring of 2022 and 2023.

The Health Council of the Netherlands, established in 1902, is an independent scientific advisory body. Its remit is “to advise the government and Parliament on the current level of knowledge with respect to public health issues and health (services) research...” (Section 22, Health Act).

The Health Council receives most requests for advice from the Ministers of Health, Welfare and Sport, Infrastructure and Water Management, Social Affairs and Employment, and Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The Council can publish advisory reports on its own initiative. It usually does this in order to ask attention for developments or trends that are thought to be relevant to government policy.

Most Health Council reports are prepared by multidisciplinary committees of Dutch or, sometimes, foreign experts, appointed in a personal capacity.

The reports are available to the public.

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