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COVID-19 vaccination

Vaccination of 12 – 15 year olds

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Why are 12-15 year olds being offered the COVID-19 vaccine?

NHS Wales will begin offering the COVID-19 vaccine to all children and young people aged 12 – 15 years.

This was recommended by the UK's Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) after reviewing evidence on the public health benefits of extending vaccination to younger people. They considered the mental health and long-term prospects for young people, and the impact on education.

The CMOs said that education was one of the most important drivers of improved public health and mental health. Evidence from clinical public health colleagues was clear about the impact that absent or disrupted face-to-face education has had on the welfare and mental health of many children and young people.

The Joint Committee for Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) reported that the benefits from vaccination are marginally greater than the potential known harms in this age group, but could not be recommended on health grounds alone.

The JCVI suggested that the government may wish to seek further views on things that were outside their remit - wider societal and educational impacts - from the Chief Medical Officers of the four nations.

The UK CMOs considered a range of evidence on the wider public health benefits, as well as the risks, of universal vaccination in this age group before recommending that vaccination should go ahead.

In August 2021, the vaccination programme was extended to include 16 and 17 year olds. Everyone in this age group in Wales has been invited to be vaccinated.

Why did the advice vary for 12-15 year olds compared to 16-17 year olds?

Young people aged 16 and 17 years are moving towards adulthood, higher education and/or the workplace. Their social behaviour and social mixing patterns are different compared to children aged 12 to 15 years, and throughout the pandemic rates of infection have been consistently higher in 16 to 17-year olds compared to younger children. Those aged 16 and 17 years can also provide informed consent for their own vaccination.

What do 12-15 year olds need to do?

They will receive information from their health board about when and where they can get vaccinated. How they get the vaccine will vary depending on where they live in Wales, but it will be in a vaccination centre or school setting. Please do not call your GP to ask about an appointment.

It’s important that parents and guardians talk about vaccination with young people to see if they want to accept the offer. They should explain why vaccination is being offered as well as understanding the risks. Please use trusted sources of information, like the NHS and Public Health Wales, to inform decisions around vaccination.

Information for children and young people will be available from Public Health Wales in due course.

Health Boards in Wales have been planning for the vaccination of this age group since May, to be ready if the decision was made.

The intention is to offer all 12-15 year olds an appointment and to vaccinate all who choose to come forward by October half term.

The programme will use vaccinators with experience of vaccinating children and young people. If the person being vaccinated has a fear of needles or feels anxious, let the person giving the vaccine know. They will be understanding and offer support.

You should not attend a vaccine appointment if you have COVID symptoms or are:

- self-isolating,
- waiting for a COVID-19 test result, or
- within 4 weeks of having a positive COVID-19 test.

If any of the above, please cancel and wait until you have recovered to have the vaccine.

Will the vaccine protect younger people?

The vaccination will reduce the chance of you suffering from COVID-19 disease. It may take a few weeks for your body to build up some protection after having the vaccine.

Like all medicines no vaccine is completely effective. Some people may still get COVID-19 despite having the vaccine, but this should be less severe.

The vaccine given to children and young people is the Pfizer vaccine.

Tests have shown the vaccine is safe and effective. The Pfizer vaccine has been approved for use from age 12 up by the UK’s independent medicines regulator.

The vaccine has not been approved for use in under 12s and this is not being considered at this time.

Am I at risk from COVID-19 infection?

COVID-19 is an infectious disease that affects your breathing. Very few children and young people with COVID infection go on to have severe disease, but the illness can carry on months after infection, known as Long Covid.

Coronavirus can affect anyone. Some children and young people are at greater risk. This includes those who already live with severe health conditions.

The JCVI also recommended that some children and young people with weakened immune systems should be added to the vaccination programme. This was because they were at higher risk of serious illness from COVID.

For most children and young people COVID is a mild illness. Symptoms may last for no longer than 2 to 3 weeks.

If you need more information on symptoms visit: NHS 111 Wales

Are there side effects or potential risks?

After having the vaccine:

- Your arm might feel heavy or sore.
- Your body might ache.
- You might feel like you have a cold or the flu.
- You might have a headache.
- You might feel tired.
- You might feel very hot or very cold.

If you feel unwell, you can rest and take painkillers like paracetamol. You should feel better in a few days.

A very small number of people may get:

- problems with their heart (myocarditis) – this can feel like your heart is beating in a different way than usual
- pain in their chest (pericarditis)
- breathing problems

If you feel unwell and are not sure what help you need you can use NHS 111.

They will tell you what to do. If it is an emergency, they will be able to send an ambulance.

If someone feels unwell after their vaccine, you can report it using the yellow card website. This helps find out how different people feel after the vaccine and makes sure the vaccine keeps people safe.

How many doses will 12-15 year olds be offered?

All 12-15 year olds in Wales will be offered a first dose of the Pfizer vaccine. The JCVI has seen more safety data for Pfizer for this age group so it is the preferred vaccine.

The JCVI has been asked for advice on whether second doses should be offered when more international data is available on second doses in this age group. This will not be before the Spring 2022.

How many doses will those in at-risk groups receive?

Those aged 12 and above who are in an ‘at risk’ group will be offered a two-dose primary schedule unless they are severely immunosuppressed, in which case a three-dose schedule is advised (JCVI guidance).

Will teachers be offered boosters at the same time as children and young people?

No, prioritisation is not decided by profession. It’s expected that the booster programme will start with priority groups 1-9 as defined by the JCVI (the same as the previous part of the programme), with people being offered a booster six months after their second dose. Some teachers may be in this group due to health conditions, or age.

Will teachers who have not yet taken up their offer for vaccination (first or second dose) be able to get vaccinated in schools?

No, 93% of all school staff are already double vaccinated. There are walk-in centres across Wales where no appointment is needed, for anybody who hasn’t yet had their first or second vaccine (as long as there is an 8 week interval).

Can under 16s consent to vaccination?

For those under 16 years of age, consent to vaccination is sought from a person with parental responsibility. Consent is only needed from one person with parental responsibility as long as there is no dispute about vaccination with any other parent responsible for that child or another person “in loco parentis” where a decision by the courts may be needed.

For vaccination centres, the parent or carer will provide consent when they arrive with the child/young person.

In a secondary school setting, it is common practice for consent forms and information (or links to information), to be sent to the child’s parents or guardian in advance of the immunisation session. The consent forms may be paper or electronic systems where the parents are emailed to seek consent. Written parental consent is sought in advance as the parents or guardian are not usually present at the time of vaccination.

What is Gillick competence?

Under 16s are not automatically presumed to be legally competent to make decisions about their healthcare, including whether they should be given the COVID-19 vaccine. However, the courts have stated that under 16s will be competent to give valid consent to a particular intervention if they have “sufficient understanding and intelligence to understand fully what is proposed”.

The Gillick test provides that if a child under the age of 16 has sufficient understanding and intelligence to understand what is being proposed, care and treatment can be provided without parental consent.

If a child is not competent to give consent for themselves, consent should be sought from a person with parental responsibility.

Can schools help secure parental or child consent?

Although schools may host immunisation services and help in distributing information, they are not responsible for securing parental or child consent, assessing Gillick competence or mediating between parents and children who may disagree about whether or not to consent. This is the role of the school nurses, who have the expertise and experience to handle these issues and whose registered nurses are professionally accountable.

In Wales the vaccine will predominantly be offered through vaccination centres, so the role of most schools will be minimal i.e. sharing factual information provided by the health board.

Were children's rights considered in the advice given by Chief Medical Officers?

Yes, children's rights were at the forefront of decision making. The CMOs considered overall wellbeing, in line with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Social Services and Wellbeing Act and the Well-being of Future Generations Act. These are all duties on Welsh Ministers that are broader than simply medical outcomes. These considerations were beyond the remit of JCVI - which has given very valuable advice – and have been used to inform ministerial decisions.