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Home Page

[Back to Home Page »](#)

Contents

More older people availing of seasonal influenza vaccine

Anthrax identified in heroin users in Scotland

Applicants sought for ECDC training programme

Latest HPSC reports

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More older people availing of seasonal influenza vaccine

In Ireland, annual influenza vaccination is recommended for adults and children who are at risk of influenza-related complications, including all persons 65 years of age and older. Influenza and its related illnesses remain a major cause of preventable morbidity and mortality in older people worldwide. Among older people, vaccination is thought to reduce influenza-related morbidity by 60% and influenza-related mortality by 70-80%.¹

Influenza vaccination (both vaccine and administration) is free for all medical cardholders and GP visit cardholders in Ireland. From mid-2001 to the end of 2008, all individuals aged 70 years and older were eligible for a medical card. Since 1st January 2009, automatic entitlement to a medical card for the over 70s no longer applies. All those aged over 70 who now apply for a medical card are subject to a means test based on income. On August 1st 2009, 419,327 (89.6%) of the population aged 65 years or older had either a medical card or a GP visit card (source: Primary Care Reimbursement Service (PCRS) and 2006 CSO population census). Approximately, 52.3% of the population aged 65 to 69 years have a medical card or a GP visit card. GP visit cards have been available since mid-2006.

In 2004, a study was undertaken in Ireland to measure influenza vaccine uptake among medical cardholders (aged 65 years or older) for the 2003/2004-influenza season.² This study has been repeated for each influenza season since, to determine influenza vaccine uptake among medical cardholders (aged 65 years or older). The study was expanded to include GP visit cardholders for the 2006/2007, 2007/2008 and 2008/2009-influenza seasons.

Methodology

Information was obtained from the Primary Care Reimbursement Service (PCRS), HSE- Finance Shared Services on the number of registered medical cardholders and GP visit cardholders aged 65 years and older, as well as the number of patients vaccinated with influenza vaccine (by age group and HSE area) during the 2008/2009-influenza season. Data refers to GP returns received by the PCRS between September 2008 and August 2009. Influenza uptake rates by age group and HSE area were calculated based on the average number of registered patients with medical cards and GP visit cards during this time period.

Results

All data refer to medical cardholders and GP visit cardholders only. The average uptake for influenza vaccination nationally during the 2008/2009-influenza season in those aged 65 years and older was 70.1%. This is a marked increase compared with an average uptake rate of 61.7% during the 2007/2008-influenza season.³ Variation in vaccination coverage was observed between HSE areas (range: 68.2%-71.7%) (figure 1).

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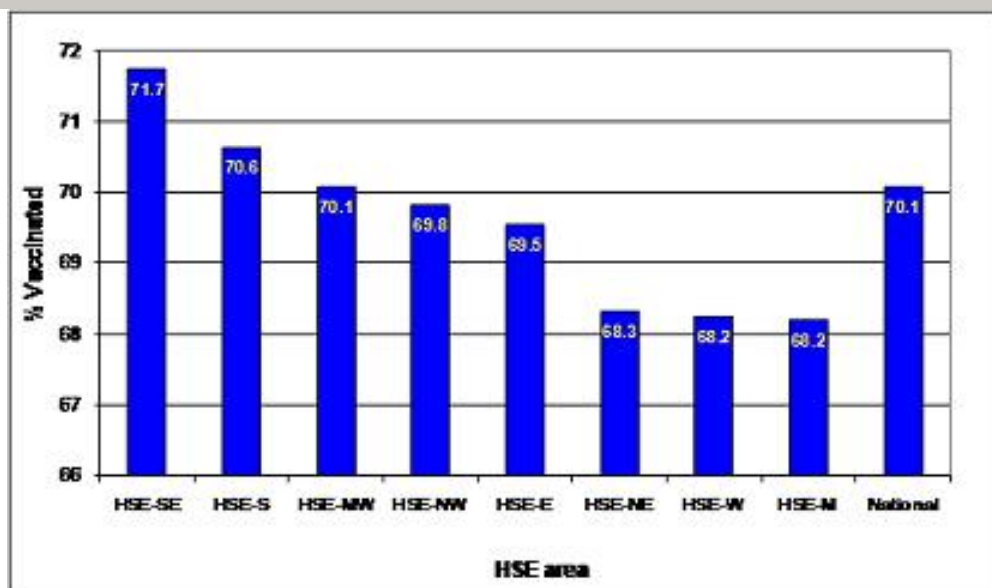


Figure 1. Percentage of medical cardholders and GP visit cardholders (65 years of age and older) who received influenza vaccine during the 2008/2009-influenza season, by HSE area

Nationally, the highest uptake (75.1%) of influenza vaccine among older people was in those aged 75 years of age and older (ranging from 71.4%-77.8% across all HSE areas). The lowest national uptake (55.8%) was in the 65-69 year age group (ranging from 53.2% - 57.8% across all HSE areas) (table 1).

Age Group (years)	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
65-69	51.6	49.1	52.9	50.2	51.0	55.8
70-74	58.7	57.6	61.5	59.2	60.0	69.7
75+	67.3	67.4	66.9	64.7	66.1	75.1
65+	62.0	61.4	63.0	60.6	61.7	70.1

Table 1. National average influenza immunisation uptake for 2003/2004, 2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2006/2007, 2007/2008 and 2008/2009-influenza seasons by age group

Discussion

In Ireland, the average influenza vaccination uptake rate for the 2008/2009-influenza season among medical cardholders and GP visit cardholders aged 65 years of age and older was 70.1%, a marked increase on the reported uptake rate of 61.7% for the 2007/2008-influenza season and from the mean uptake rate (61.7%) for 2003/2004 to 2008/2009-influenza seasons.³ This is the highest uptake rate reported since influenza vaccine uptake surveillance was initiated during the 2003/2004-influenza season. The second highest uptake rate reported was 63.0% during the 2005/2006-influenza season.

The reason for the increase in uptake during the 2008/2009-influenza season is not yet clear. Vaccination data are collated by the PCRS by date of payment claim rather than date of vaccination so it is possible that payment claims for vaccines administered in previous seasons were also submitted for payment during the 2008/2009-influenza season. The PCRS, Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the National Immunisation Office are currently conducting a review of these data to investigate possible reasons for the increase in uptake.

A study of various European countries during the 2006/2007-influenza season reported uptake rates in older

people ranging from 1.8%-82.1%.⁴ The Council of the European Union issued a formal recommendation on seasonal influenza vaccine in December 2009.⁵ Their recommendations include a target of 75% seasonal influenza vaccine uptake in older age groups and people with chronic medical conditions prior to the 2014/2015-influenza season or earlier. The European recommendation also includes education, training and information exchange on seasonal influenza and vaccination to be provided for health care workers, risk groups and their families and to remove the obstacles to influenza vaccination uptake. The World Health Organization (WHO) has set a target of 75% for influenza vaccine uptake in those aged 65 years and older, to be reached by 2010 (an increase from the 50% WHO target that was set for 2006).

Although influenza vaccine is recommended for all individuals 65 years of age and older in Ireland, it is evident that there is inconsistent uptake amongst this group. However, it should be noted that data for the 65-69 year age group only represent medical and GP visit cardholders in this age group and as such do not include 50% of the population in this age group. The uptake in this other group is unknown.

Reasons for inadequate vaccination uptake rates, particularly among those aged 65-74 years are unclear. A national telephone survey of risk groups and on the uptake of influenza and pneumococcal vaccine in Ireland was conducted in 2006.⁶ This survey estimated influenza vaccine uptake among persons aged 65 years and older at 68.6%, reaching the 2006 WHO target. Low self-perceived risk of getting influenza was the main reason stated by those aged 65 years and older for non-vaccination. Family doctor recommendation was the most commonly cited reason for receiving the influenza vaccine.⁶ Other studies have also reported cost of vaccination, lack of awareness of self-risk associated with influenza disease, as well as distrust of vaccinations, disbelief in vaccine efficacy and inadequate strength of recommendations from health professionals as possible reasons for inadequate vaccination uptake.^{4, 7, 8, 9, 10}

Key points

- Influenza vaccine uptake for those aged 65 years or older during the 2008/2009 season showed an increase in comparison to the 2007/2008 season but remains slightly below the WHO target of 75% uptake by 2010.
- In Ireland, influenza vaccination uptake rates among medical cardholders and GP visit cardholders aged 65 years of age and older show regional and age group variation.
- Health professionals should encourage and facilitate access to vaccination for their at-risk patients, including all patients 65 years of age and older.
- Work on increasing awareness within the wider community about the value of influenza vaccination for those at risk of influenza complications should be supported as part of efforts to increase vaccine coverage.
- The need for a national immunisation register is ever more relevant in order to estimate more timely and complete influenza vaccination uptake rates in risk groups, individuals aged 65 years and older and health care workers.
- Projects need to be developed to promote influenza vaccination uptake among health care workers as recommended by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).¹¹

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