# Policy changes to Covid boosters provoke frustration and controversy among elderly patients in England



Elderly patients in England are increasingly abusing pharmacists after being denied the Covid-19 vaccine on the NHS due to tightened eligibility rules introduced this year. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has limited free NHS Covid boosters to people aged 75 and over, the immunosuppressed, and those living in older adult care homes. This decision excludes a large cohort, particularly the 65 to 74-year-olds, unless they have a qualifying immunosuppressive condition. Pharmacies report that many in this age group are unaware of the change when booking online, leading to confrontations when they arrive for their vaccine appointments only to be told they must pay privately, at approximately £100, or wait until next winter.

According to the Independent Pharmacies Association, the communication around this policy shift by NHS officials has been poor, compounded by a confusing online booking system that allows patients to self-declare immunosuppression status but verifies eligibility only at the point of vaccination. Dr Leyla Hannbeck, Chief Executive of the Association, critiqued this development as a ‘false economy,’ emphasizing that last winter witnessed high hospitalisation rates from Covid and other winter viruses among the elderly. Pharmacy teams are now frequently subjected to aggressive behaviour, including verbal abuse and even physical hostility, a situation Dr Hannbeck deemed unacceptable and unfair to frontline healthcare workers.

Government bodies have defended the policy, with NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) reiterating that the JCVI's guidance is based on scientific evidence and cost-effectiveness. The DHSC notes that population immunity remains high, and additional doses provide limited protection against transmission, justifying the focus on the most vulnerable groups. The NHS website clearly states eligibility criteria, advising patients to check before booking and to self-declare only if eligible. Despite this, confusion persists, especially as the UK faces rising hospitalisation rates linked to a new Covid variant known as XFG. While there is no evidence that the variant causes more severe disease, data from the UK Health Security Agency shows Covid hospital admissions rising by 60 percent recently, with 1,216 patients hospitalised by the end of August.

The stricter criteria for NHS Covid vaccine eligibility have sparked debate, particularly given the increased demand for flu vaccinations in the same older age groups. Last winter’s flu vaccine uptake fell significantly, even as flu-related deaths soared to a 40-year high. This divergence in vaccine policy has left many aged 65 to 74 eligible for free flu jabs but excluded from free Covid boosters, raising concerns over public health and the potential for heightened winter illness burden.

Pharmacists have long been crucial in the Covid vaccination effort. However, this role has faced multiple challenges beyond patient frustration. Previous reports highlighted systemic issues such as delays and reduced uptake caused by a confusing booking system and occasional vaccine supply disruptions. Moreover, a lack of smooth collaboration with General Practitioners has hindered pharmacy-led initiatives designed to alleviate pressures on frontline healthcare services. For example, the ‘Pharmacy First’ scheme, aimed at enabling pharmacists to treat common conditions and reduce GP workload, has suffered from a lack of GP referrals, affecting access and patient care continuity.

The pandemic has also taken a significant toll on pharmacy professionals themselves. There have been tragic instances, such as the recent case of an NHS pharmacist who died by suicide after suffering debilitating complications from a Covid jab and being denied compensation. This case has prompted calls for reform of the government’s Vaccine Damage Payment Scheme to better support those adversely affected.

Adding to the complexity, certain patients with specific medical conditions or allergies have faced difficulties in accessing suitable Covid vaccines. For instance, some elderly individuals allergic to both Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were left without NHS booster options when alternative vaccines like Novavax were withdrawn from the programme due to cost considerations. Such cases highlight ongoing challenges in balancing policy decisions, vaccine availability, and individual patient needs.

As the UK moves forward with its vaccination strategy, the current policy focusing Covid boosters on the very elderly and immunosuppressed aims to protect those at greatest risk of severe disease while managing healthcare resources effectively. However, the resulting confusion, patient frustration, and frontline stress underscore the need for clearer communication, more inclusive planning, and continued support for the entire healthcare workforce, including pharmacists, who remain key to the nation’s public health response.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.diabetes.co.uk/news/2025/aug/under-75s-to-not-be-offered-covid-19-jabs-this-winter.html), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd1rzrnxdklo)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
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* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.diabetes.co.uk/news/2025/aug/under-75s-to-not-be-offered-covid-19-jabs-this-winter.html), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/04/pharmacists-accuse-gps-in-england-of-scuppering-pharmacy-first-scheme), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 6 – [[6]](https://news.sky.com/story/pharmacist-who-took-his-own-life-after-covid-jab-complications-was-denied-compensation-13217959), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 7 – [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd1rzrnxdklo), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.diabetes.co.uk/news/2025/aug/under-75s-to-not-be-offered-covid-19-jabs-this-winter.html)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15164329/Patients-abusing-pharmacists-denied-NHS-Covid-jab.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.diabetes.co.uk/news/2025/aug/under-75s-to-not-be-offered-covid-19-jabs-this-winter.html> - Health officials have announced that individuals under 75 will not be offered COVID-19 vaccinations this winter. This decision excludes approximately six million adults aged between 65 and 74, who were previously eligible during the pandemic. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has recommended that COVID-19 jabs be offered only to adults over 75, those living in care homes, and individuals who are immunosuppressed. Critics, including Dr Leyla Hannbeck, Chief Executive of the Independent Pharmacies Association, have expressed concern over the decision, citing potential risks of increased COVID-19 cases and hospitalisations in the excluded age group. The Department of Health and Social Care has defended the decision, stating it is based on expert advice from the JCVI, which continuously monitors and evaluates emerging scientific evidence on COVID vaccines. They encourage anyone who is eligible for COVID vaccination to come forward this autumn. The JCVI's advice is based on the current high levels of population immunity to COVID-19, suggesting that additional doses provide limited protection against infection and transmission. The Scottish government has also announced similar restrictions, offering free flu vaccines to those aged 65 and over but limiting COVID-19 boosters to people aged 75 and over and the immunosuppressed for 2025. This policy change has sparked criticism due to the exclusion of 65-74-year-olds, who remain eligible for flu vaccines. Flu-related deaths have surged to a 40-year high, and flu vaccine uptake dropped by one-fifth last season, prompting NHS efforts to increase vaccination appointments. The JCVI's decision to focus on the oldest adults and those with compromised immune systems is based on cost-effectiveness assessments and current population immunity levels. However, campaigners and public health advocates have questioned the rationale behind the new criteria, expressing concerns about potential confusion and increased isolation among older adults who are now ineligible for the COVID-19 booster. The debate over winter vaccinations is likely to intensify as the season progresses, with discussions focusing on the balance between protecting vulnerable populations and managing healthcare resources effectively.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/04/pharmacists-accuse-gps-in-england-of-scuppering-pharmacy-first-scheme> - Pharmacists in England have accused General Practitioners (GPs) of undermining the 'Pharmacy First' scheme, a government initiative aimed at reducing GP workloads by allowing pharmacists to treat patients for seven common conditions. The National Pharmacy Association (NPA) reported that three-quarters of pharmacists are not receiving regular referrals from GPs, with some areas experiencing no referrals at all. The NPA has raised concerns with the health secretary, urging for an urgent summit to address the issue. The 'Pharmacy First' scheme was introduced to ease pressure on overworked GPs and provide patients with greater choice in healthcare. However, the lack of GP referrals has hindered its effectiveness, leading to increased patient frustration and potential delays in treatment. Pharmacists have called for improved communication and collaboration between GPs and pharmacies to ensure the success of the scheme and better patient outcomes.
4. <https://www.thepharmacist.co.uk/news/pharmacy-sites-told-to-halt-covid-jab-bookings-from-29-march/> - Pharmacy-led sites and mass vaccination centres have been instructed to suspend bookings for COVID-19 vaccinations from 29 March due to a significant reduction in vaccine supply. NHS England notified vaccination sites of a 'significant reduction' in weekly vaccine supply from manufacturers, expected to continue for four weeks. As a result, vaccination centres and community pharmacy-led local vaccination services were advised to close unfilled bookings from the week commencing 29 March and ensure no further appointments were uploaded to the National Booking System or Local Booking Systems from 1 to 30 April. This decision has raised concerns about potential delays in the vaccination programme and the impact on patients awaiting their COVID-19 jabs.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/12/15/pharmacies-accuse-nhs-tactical-error-rejecting-help-covid-booster/> - Pharmacies have accused the NHS of a 'tactical error' for rejecting their offers to assist with the COVID-19 booster vaccination rollout. Despite more than 5,300 pharmacies across the country offering to participate, fewer than 1,500 were enrolled. Pharmacists argue that this decision has left millions of people unprotected and has hindered the acceleration of the booster programme. The NHS's reluctance to involve pharmacies has been criticised for potentially slowing down the vaccination process and limiting access for patients seeking booster jabs.
6. <https://news.sky.com/story/pharmacist-who-took-his-own-life-after-covid-jab-complications-was-denied-compensation-13217959> - The family of an NHS pharmacist who took his own life after suffering paralysing complications from a COVID-19 jab is calling for urgent reform of the government's compensation scheme for vaccine damage. John Cross, who was told by the official medical assessor that the jab had caused his rare neurological effects but that he wasn't disabled enough for a payment, spent seven months recovering in hospital but was left with chronic pain and numbness. After his claim to the Vaccine Damage Payment Scheme was rejected, his mental health deteriorated, leading to his tragic death. The family is seeking to overturn the judgment and force reform of the scheme, highlighting the need for better support for individuals who suffer severe side effects from vaccinations.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd1rzrnxdklo> - Diana Tasker, a 78-year-old woman from Scarborough, has been left isolated and unable to leave her house after the only COVID-19 vaccine she could safely receive was withdrawn from the NHS booster programme. Ms Tasker, who is allergic to both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, had previously been given an alternative booster jab. However, the Novavax booster became unavailable, leaving her with no option but to isolate. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) confirmed that Novavax had not been offered in the spring top-up programme and had been replaced by more 'cost-effective' vaccines. Ms Tasker has been seeking answers from various organisations but has received little response. The situation highlights the challenges faced by individuals with specific medical conditions or allergies in accessing appropriate COVID-19 vaccinations.