

Pharmacies available to join upcoming seasonal vaccination campaign

Study reveals expansion of vaccination to pharmacies saved 310,000 hours of SNS workforce time

The Minister of Health, Ana Paula Martins, announced that a protocol will be established with pharmacies for joint activities to be developed in coordination with other stakeholders and the National Health Service (SNS), resulting from a “virtuous relationship that works for the people.” The aim is to leverage the installed capacity of the portuguese pharmacy network and its proximity to the population, noting that in some areas, “aging populations see the pharmacy as an important, even emotional, space of connection.”

The Minister of Health made these remarks during the closing speech of the conference “Seasonal Vaccination | There’s More Health in the Pharmacy,” promoted by the National Association of Pharmacies (ANF). At the event, the main findings of the Evaluation Study of the 2023/24 Seasonal Vaccination Campaign, developed by the Center for Health Studies and Evaluation (CEFAR), were presented.

“Internationally, pharmacies are also used for vaccination. In Portugal, vaccination against flu and COVID-19 is now available in all participating pharmacies, helping improve access and quality of healthcare provided to citizens,” added Ana Paula Martins.

“The joint effort of over 3,500 vaccination points enabled the administration of nearly 4.5 million vaccines, with the undeniable impact of the pharmacy network in this operation. Approximately 70% of the vaccines were administered in pharmacies,” which allowed “maintaining or surpassing flu vaccination coverage rates from previous years, and we achieved a COVID-19 vaccination coverage rate nearly five times higher than this year’s European average,” stated Ema Paulino, president of ANF, who expressed pride in the contribution of community pharmacy teams to these results.

“We believe the evidence is sufficient to work on solutions involving all healthcare stakeholders to replicate the success of the 2023/24 seasonal vaccination campaign,” concluded Ema Paulino, who also expressed pharmacies’ willingness to support other measures that benefit from proximity, making people’s daily lives easier.

Key Findings of the Seasonal Vaccination Campaign Evaluation Study | Public Health Challenges

The results show that including community pharmacies in the vaccination process “reduced barriers to access, improved satisfaction with the process, freed up resources in the National Health Service (SNS), generated economic savings for users, and may have positively impacted population vaccination coverage.” The study also reveals that the vast majority of respondents (94.8%) agree with administering flu and COVID-19 vaccines in community pharmacies.

Proximity, Accessibility, and Health Gains

Expanding the 2023/24 seasonal vaccination campaign to community pharmacies increased the physical availability of vaccination sites by over 400% compared to 2022/23. The population had access to 3,500 vaccination points (1,000 SNS units (+300 compared to 2022/23) and 2,488 participating community pharmacies (88.8% of all pharmacies in mainland Portugal, spread across 278 municipalities).

With the inclusion of pharmacies, the average distance to vaccination sites was reduced by about 50%. The average municipal distance to the nearest vaccination point dropped from 2.4 km to 1.2 km. This proximity likely enabled more people to walk to the vaccination site (54% vs. 20.3% in 2023/24) and fewer to use cars (43.1% vs. 66.3% in 2023/24).

Pharmacy participation in the campaign freed up approximately 310,000 hours of SNS human resources, which became available for other primary care tasks. These data are particularly relevant given the recognized need for efficient healthcare resource management.

Estimated savings for individuals amounted to 2.4 million euros, based on a population survey on transportation costs to vaccination sites (including public transport, car, and taxi).

Coverage and Vaccination Intent

Despite the challenges of the 2023/24 vaccination season, including increasing vaccine hesitancy and the inclusion of new age groups (the number of people to be vaccinated rose to about 3 million, with the addition of the 60–64 age group, about 600,000 more than the previous season), nearly 4.5 million vaccines were administered in primary care and community pharmacies across the country.

The reduced distance may have positively impacted vaccination coverage. According to the CEFAR study, municipalities with the greatest reduction in distance to vaccination sites saw a 5.9% increase in coverage compared to 2023/24.

Flu vaccination coverage among people over 65 was 72.1%, maintaining the previous year's coverage of 72.2%. For COVID-19, coverage was 60.8%, down from 75.8% in 2022/23.

Regarding vaccination intent, results indicate that 45.8% of the population over 60 is hesitant or refuses to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in the next season, concluding that the effectiveness of seasonal vaccination campaigns faces major challenges both in Portugal and globally.

The evaluation study, promoted by ANF and conducted by CEFAR, aimed to characterize the population eligible for free seasonal vaccination in pharmacies in 2023/24 under the collaboration with the SNS, assess the impact of community pharmacy participation in the campaign, and generate knowledge for preparing future seasonal vaccination campaigns.