

I N F L U E N Z A

WHAT IS INFLUENZA?

Influenza (known as the flu) is a highly contagious acute respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses A, B, and rarely C.

HOW IS INFLUENZA SPREAD?

The virus is spread from person-to-person through microscopic droplets, when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It is easier to 'catch' influenza in crowded areas and in confined spaces.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms include the sudden onset of: fever, headache, muscle and joint pain, feeling tired, sore throat, cough, runny or stuffy nose, and often extreme fatigue. Symptoms usually appear within 1–3 days of the person being infected. A person is considered contagious for another 3–4 days after symptoms appear. Most people recover within 2–7 days. Compared with other viral respiratory infections, such as common colds, influenza causes more severe complications such as pneumonia—particularly in children, elderly people, and other vulnerable groups.

HOW CAN INFLUENZA BE TREATED?

New medications for the treatment of influenza can be effective in reducing the severity and the duration of the illness. These must be taken early in the illness to be effective and are only available on prescription from your doctor. Otherwise, fever, headaches, and muscle pains, can be treated with fluids, paracetamol, and rest.

HOW CAN INFLUENZA BE PREVENTED?

Vaccination remains the most effective protection against influenza infection. Anyone who wishes to avoid the flu should think about getting vaccinated well before winter begins each year. Influenza vaccination is recommended for:

- all adults aged 65 years and over;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over;
- adults and children older than six months with chronic diseases affecting the heart or lungs;
- adults, and children older than six months of age, with other chronic illnesses that require regular medical follow up;
- residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities;
- persons with immunodeficiency, including HIV–AIDS;
- adults and children older than six months who live in a household with a person who fits into any of the above categories;
- healthcare workers, and staff of nursing homes and long term care facilities, who look after people at high risk;
- children and teenagers (six months to 18 years) on long-term aspirin therapy;
- travellers, especially those in the above risk groups, if travelling to the northern hemisphere between October

and March, should consider having an influenza vaccination prior to departure;

- women who will be pregnant in the second or third trimester during the influenza season.

WHEN SHOULD I BE VACCINATED?

The best time to be vaccinated against influenza is in autumn, prior to the winter influenza outbreaks. The vaccine is usually available from March each year.

WHERE CAN I RECEIVE MY VACCINATION?

Your doctor can vaccinate you with the current vaccine for the season.

WILL I HAVE TO PAY FOR THE VACCINE?

If you are 65 years or older, or are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander aged 50 years or older, the vaccine will be free. However, the doctor may charge a consultation fee.

IS THE VACCINE SAFE?

Yes. The most frequent side effect of vaccination is soreness at the vaccination site, which may last up to 2 days. Influenza-like symptoms such as fever, fatigue, and muscle soreness, can also occur. These symptoms mimic the flu. Other serious side effects are rare.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO CATCH THE FLU FROM BEING VACCINATED?

No. The vaccine contains killed virus that cannot cause influenza.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE VACCINE?

It will take about two weeks for your body to develop immunity against the influenza virus after your vaccination. During this time you should avoid contact with people who may have influenza. The influenza virus changes from time to time and the vaccine is designed to match the current virus that is circulating among the population. The vaccine will provide about 70 per cent protection against infection for about one year. However, even if you do catch the flu, the likelihood of developing complications from the infection will be reduced.

WHO SHOULD NOT HAVE THE VACCINATION?

Those who should not be vaccinated are:

- people with allergies to eggs;
- people with a high fever (greater than 38.5° C) should wait until their fever has gone;
- people who have previously had Guillain Barré syndrome should discuss this with their doctor prior to proceeding with vaccination;
- children younger than six months of age.

DO I NEED TO RECEIVE A FLU VACCINE EVERY YEAR?

Yes. Annual vaccination is necessary to provide continuing protection against the most recent influenza virus.

For further information contact your doctor, community health centre, or nearest public health unit.

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