

Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza or 'the flu' is a common, highly contagious respiratory viral illness that can cause serious illness and even death in young children, older adults and certain vulnerable people of all ages. It is not the same as the common cold. Influenza is most common in winter months.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza is spread through the air when someone coughs or sneezes or even talks. These actions allow the virus to be spread from person to person via droplets from the nose or throat of an infected person.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Typical symptoms include sudden onset of fever, headache, sore throat, runny nose, cough, fatigue, and general aches and pains often accompanied by congestion in the nose, throat and lungs. Children may have nausea or vomiting and diarrhoea, but these symptoms are uncommon in adults. Most people recover within a few days, but in more serious infections complications such as pneumonia, inflammation of the heart and or lungs can occur resulting in a much longer illness.

What is the difference between influenza and a 'cold'?

Although the symptoms of influenza and other 'cold' virus infections can be similar especially in children, influenza tends to be more debilitating than the common 'cold' and lasts much longer.

How serious is influenza?

Influenza can be a serious illness for very old people, very young people, or people of any age who have a chronic medical condition e.g. heart, lung, kidney, liver, immune or metabolic (especially diabetes) diseases. Most healthy children and adults only have minor symptoms or 'colds'. Most influenza cases occur in the under 4 year age group or in people over 60 years of age.

Is there a vaccine against influenza?

Yes, influenza vaccine protects people against the influenza infection and the common complications of this infection. Each year a new vaccine containing the 3 most common strains of circulating influenza viruses is produced. The ideal time for children and adults to get vaccinated is well before the winter season starts. Vaccine is available from your local doctor during March/April each year.

Who should be vaccinated against influenza?

Influenza vaccine is recommended and available free to:

- All individuals 65 years of age or older
- Indigenous adults 50 years of age or older
- Indigenous adults 15 - 49 years of age with a predisposing medical condition
- WA children 6 months of age to 4 years.

Influenza is also recommended but unfunded for the following groups:

- People less than 65 years of age with chronic medical conditions that predispose them to complications of influenza.
- Older high risk children (\geq 6 months of age) with chronic cardiac conditions, chronic suppurative lung disease and chronic illnesses requiring regular hospitalisation and intervention. Two doses of influenza vaccine, at least one month apart, are recommended for children aged less than 9 years of age who are receiving influenza vaccine for the first time.

These vaccines must be prescribed and are subsidised through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

Parents of children less than 2 years of age with a higher risk of complications should vaccinate their whole family against influenza to reduce their risk of infection. Influenza vaccine is also recommended for pregnant women who will be in their second or third trimester during the influenza 'season', which is usually from May to October.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes. The most common side effects of influenza vaccination are soreness and redness at the site of injection. These symptoms generally last 1 - 2 days and are reported in 20% of people who receive vaccines. 'Flu-like' symptoms, such as fever, fatigue and muscle soreness are reported in less than 1% of people. These symptoms usually occur within 6 - 12 hours of vaccination and last 1 - 2 days. This is a reaction common to many vaccines; the vaccine itself does not cause Flu.

Immediate allergic reactions occur rarely after Influenza vaccination. These reactions are probably the result of an allergic reaction to egg protein which is present in the vaccine.



Who should not have the vaccine?

Influenza vaccination should be postponed if you have an acute illness, especially with a fever. People with severe allergic reactions should not have the vaccination. Your doctor will be able to advise you whether you should receive the vaccine.

Why do some people get 'flu-like' symptoms after influenza vaccination?

The vaccine contains particles of killed viruses, so it cannot cause influenza. Flu like symptoms are more likely to be due to another non-specific infection which lasts 1 - 2 days rather than an effect of the vaccine.

How do people protect themselves from getting influenza?

Influenza is a highly contagious infection, therefore, people need to practice and teach their children routine hygiene behaviours on a day to day basis which will give some protection against getting influenza. Examples are:

- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing;
- Chewing with your mouth closed to avoid spraying over other people;
- Using a paper tissue or handkerchief to wipe your nose;
- Washing your hands after blowing your nose and on a regular basis to remove any virus particles picked up on your hands from touching contaminated surfaces;
- Washing your hands before preparing food to prevent transmission of the virus from your contaminated hands into food;
- Observing for signs of illness, fever, runny nose, and cough. If present, remain at home until the fever and runny nose have ceased, to prevent transmission to others;
- Young children, or people with chronic medical conditions should seek advice from their doctor early to prevent complications.
- Avoid meeting with large groups of people if influenza is around in the community or if you have symptoms of influenza.

More information

For more information about influenza or pneumococcal vaccination, contact:

- Your GP
- Your Regional Population Health Unit (see below)

Metropolitan Upper North	9345 7100	Broome	9194 1643	Bunbury	9792 2500
Lower North	9224 1603	Geraldton	9956 1985	Port Hedland	9172 8333
Fremantle	9431 0200	Kalgoorlie	9080 8200	Northam	9622 4320
Albany	9842 7500	Carnarvon	9941 0560		

- The Australian Government's Immunisation Info line: 1800 671 811

Internet

- www.public.health.wa.gov.au
- Australian Government: www.immunise.health.gov.au
- Centers for Disease Control (USA): www.cdc.gov
- Health Protection Agency (UK): www.hpa.org.uk

