

Influenza (The Flu)

Description:

Influenza or 'the flu' is a highly contagious disease caused by infection from influenza type A or B (or rarely C) virus. These viruses infect the upper airways and lungs but can also affect other parts of the body. In Australia, outbreaks of influenza of varying severity occur every year usually between May and September.

Symptoms:

Symptoms usually appear one to three days after being infected. A person can spread influenza to others a day or two before they become unwell and up to five days after they have become unwell for adults and even longer for young children. The symptoms of influenza can include: fever, dry cough, muscle and joint pain, tiredness/extreme exhaustion, headache, sore throat and stuffy nose. Most people recover within a week, although a cough and tiredness may persist.

Transmission

The virus that causes influenza is mainly spread from person to person by virus-containing droplets produced during coughing or sneezing. The droplets can be spread up to a metre through the air and enter the body through the nose and mouth. A person can also catch influenza if they shake hands with an infected person or touch a contaminated surface such as a door knob or telephone, and then touch their nose or mouth.

Treatment:

Many people treat 'the flu' by simply resting in bed, drinking plenty of fluids, and taking over-the-counter medication that helps relieve the symptoms. In the past few years, new antiviral medications have been developed to treat influenza. These medications reduce the length of time symptoms last and help people return to their daily routines earlier. These medications are most effective if they are started within 48 hours of influenza symptoms appearing.

Health Outcome:

Most people recover from influenza within a week, although a cough and tiredness may persist. Influenza can sometimes lead to severe complications such as pneumonia. Young children, elderly people and those with certain chronic illnesses are more likely to develop complications. Influenza can be fatal.

Prevention:

The best way to protect yourself and your family is to be vaccinated. Being vaccinated gives individual protection against influenza by building immunity to the virus and preventing transmission of the virus in the community. Vaccination is required annually, as the vaccine changes each year to cover the expected disease strains.

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends influenza vaccination for anyone who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza. The 2010 seasonal flu vaccine can be given to anyone over six months of age and provides protection from both seasonal influenza and human swine influenza.

Under the National Immunisation Program, influenza vaccine is funded for the following groups:

- persons aged 65 years and over
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over
- pregnant women at any stage during pregnancy
- individuals at six months of age or older with conditions predisposing them to severe influenza: - heart disease - chronic lung conditions including severe asthma requiring frequent hospital visits - chronic neurological conditions including multiple sclerosis and spinal cord injuries - chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow up including diabetes, kidney failure and blood diseases - weakened immune system including HIV infection, cancer and chronic steroid use - children aged six months to 10 years on long term aspirin therapy.

Influenza vaccine is also strongly recommended (but not funded) for the following people:

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- residents of nursing homes and residential care facilities who do not meet the criteria above
- homeless people and those providing care to them
- health care workers
- anyone who works in a nursing home or long term care facility
- anyone who lives in a household with a person who is in a high risk category
- people providing essential services eg. police, ambulance
- travellers.

To avoid becoming ill with influenza, the best way to protect yourself and others is to:

- be vaccinated
- stay home when you are sick
- wash your hands regularly with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand gel
- wash your hands prior to touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- when coughing or sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with disposable tissues which should be disposed of immediately
- don't share items such as cigarettes, glasses or cups, lipstick, toys or anything which could be contaminated with infected secretions
- maintain at least one metre distance from people who have flu-like symptoms such as coughing or sneezing
- consult your doctor if you have a cough and high fever (38oC or more) and follow their instructions, including taking medicine as prescribed
- if attending a medical practice or emergency department, alert the receptionist of your symptoms so you can be seated away from others and possibly be given a surgical mask.

Help and Assistance

For further information, please contact your local doctor, community health centre or your nearest public health unit or phone 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84).

Other Resources

Queensland Health fact sheets:

- [Influenza and immunisation](#)
- [Pandemic \(H1N1\) 2009 - Human Swine Influenza](#)