

FACT SHEET: Influenza and vaccination - myths & misconceptions among at-risk Australians 18-64 years of age

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS¹

Influenza protection and vaccination myths

Of the at-risk 18-64 year old Australians surveyed:

- The majority (67%) believed that being fit and healthy affords some protection against contracting influenza.
- 31% believed that the influenza vaccination can give you influenza.
- Less than a third (32%) believed that the influenza vaccine is more than 70% effective in protecting them against influenza (*please see Notes to the Editor*).
- The majority (78%) of at-risk Australians surveyed were aware that the influenza vaccine only causes mild side effects, such as local soreness and swelling.

Influenza vaccination uptake rates among at-risk Australians <65 years of age

- 55% of at-risk Australians do not get vaccinated against influenza annually:

NSW/ACT	QLD	SA	VIC/ TAS	WA
48%	66%	50%	56%	61%

- More than one quarter (28%) of Australians at-risk reported that they never get vaccinated against influenza.

- 45% of at-risk Australians get vaccinated against influenza every year:

NSW/ACT	QLD	SA	VIC/ TAS	WA
52%	34%	50%	44%	39%

- This is in line with the result of the most recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) immunisation survey, which reported a national uptake among younger at-risk Australians of 42%.²

- Australians at-risk who have children are much more likely to be vaccinated against influenza annually (52 percent) compared to Australians at-risk without children (41 percent).

Reasons at-risk Australians are not getting vaccinated

Common reasons why at-risk Australians are not getting vaccinated against influenza include:

- Fear of needles: 28%
 - 48% stated that they would prefer to receive the vaccination orally.
- Time and inconvenience: 25%
- Do not think about it: 22%
- Belief that influenza is not serious enough to warrant immunisation: 20%
 - Among males surveyed, over a quarter (27%) did not consider influenza to be serious enough to warrant vaccination.

- 43% of female at-risk Australians reported that they would be less likely to get vaccinated against influenza if they were pregnant.

Perceived severity of influenza

- A third (36%) of at-risk Australians surveyed were unaware that there is an increased risk of death from influenza among those with a pre-existing medical condition.
 - Almost half (45%) of at-risk Australians believed that there is no more than four times the average risk of death from influenza, when in fact the risk of death from influenza is 40 times the average in this group.
- Nearly half of the respondents underestimated the amount of people being hospitalised in Australia annually due to influenza:
 - 47% undervalued the amount of hospitalisations caused by influenza more than three-fold, by estimating the annual hospitalisations to be less than 5,000.
- At-risk Australians remain uninformed about how long the influenza virus can survive in the environment and remain infectious:
 - On average, respondents believed that the influenza virus survives up to 4 hours on hard surfaces, when in fact it remains alive and transmittable for more than 8 hours.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted online in March 2008 among 416 Australians, aged 18-64 years, who suffered from chronic conditions as follows:

- 159 - NSW/ACT
- 129 - Victoria/Tasmania
- 71 - Queensland
- 34 - South Australia
- 23- Western Australia

The survey broadly reflects the population that have the following conditions:

- 174 - Diabetes
- 152 - Chronic asthma
- 67 - Kidney disease
- 51 - Lung disease
- 49 - Impaired immunity (including drug induced, but excluding rheumatoid arthritis)

Following completion of interviewing, the data was weighted by age, gender and area to reflect ABS population estimates.

NOTES TO THE EDITOR

At-risk Australians

- People at particular risk of severe complications from influenza are those with:³
 - Heart conditions,
 - Asthma and other lung conditions,
 - Diabetes (type 1 and type 2)
 - Kidney problems,

- Impaired immunity
- Anyone over 65 years of age
- Studies have shown that people with pre-existing conditions have a 40 times increased risk of dying from influenza-related complications and if they have both heart and lung disease that risk is increased to 800 times.⁴

Effectiveness of the influenza vaccine

- In healthy persons under 65 years of age the vaccine is 70 - 90% effective.³

Impact of influenza on the Australian healthcare system

- It is estimated that on average, influenza-like illness causes 18,000 hospitalisations annually in Australia.⁵

Influenza transmission

- Influenza is highly contagious. After someone coughs or sneezes the virus can survive for:
 - Up to an hour in the air in enclosed environments⁶
 - More than eight hours on hard surfaces such as stainless steel and plastic⁶
 - Up to five minutes on hands after transfer from other surfaces⁷

Reference

1. Galaxy Research, Influenza Vaccination Research, March 2008
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2004 Adult vaccination survey. Available at: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/phe/avssr04/avssr04.pdf>
3. NHMRC, Australian Immunisation Handbook 9th 2008
4. Colgan S, Tay-Teo K, Shik S, and Carter R Influenza vaccination for the 'at risk' Australian adults aged between 18 and 64. Part 2 Cost-of-Illness study of current practice and cost analysis of extending vaccination to all at risk Australian adults. Health Economics Group, the University of Melbourne, February 2006
5. Newall AT, Wood JG, MacIntyre CR. Influenza-related hospitalisation and death in Australians aged 50 years and older, National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance of Vaccine Preventable Diseases (NCIRS), 2007
6. V. Viruses as agents of airborne contagion [chapter V]. Annals of the New York Academic Sciences 1980;353:147-156
7. Bean B, Moore BM, Sterner B et al. Survival of influenza virus on environmental surfaces. J Infect Dis July 1982;146(1):47-51

Additional information about influenza and the Influenza Specialist Group can be found at: www.influenzaspecialistgroup.org.au

FURTHER INFORMATION

Hayley Dowling

Phone:(02) 9928 1521

Mobile:0404 852 884

Email: hayley.dowling@bm.com

Petra Rosen

Phone:(02) 9928 1506

Mobile: 0423 242 957

Email: petra.rosen@bm.com