

Fact Sheet: Influenza

What is influenza?

- Influenza is a serious, often debilitating illness which affects the whole body.
- Influenza symptoms include fever, headaches, muscle aches and pains.¹ Children's symptoms may also include nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.²
- Influenza can cause serious illness, particularly in people with underlying medical conditions, older adults and young children.
- Many people confuse the common cold with influenza; however, colds are much less severe.

How serious is seasonal influenza?

- Each year an estimated 3,500 Australians die from influenza and its complications.^{3,4}
- The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that worldwide 5-15% of the population are affected by influenza each year, there are between three and five million cases of serious illness and between 250,000 and 500,000 deaths.⁵
- In Australia it is estimated that influenza annually causes 18,000 hospitalisations and over 300,000 GP consultations.⁶
- Children are much more likely to contract influenza in any given season (20-50% compared with 10-30% in adults), with up to 70% of children contracting the virus during pandemic years.⁷

How contagious is influenza?

- Influenza is highly contagious, with children being a major transmitter of the virus.⁶ Studies have shown that influenza can survive for:
 - An hour or more in the air in enclosed environments⁸
 - More than eight hours on hard surfaces such as stainless steel and plastic⁹
 - More than an hour on hands¹⁰

Who is at particular risk of complications from influenza?²

- People with underlying medical conditions, including:
 - Heart conditions
 - Severe asthma
 - COPD and other lung conditions
 - Diabetes (type 1 and type 2)
 - Kidney problems
 - Impaired immunity such as HIV infection
 - Malignant Cancers
 - Chronic neurological disorders
- Pregnant women
- People ≥ 65 years of age, residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island adults aged ≥ 15 years are also at increased risk of severe complications from influenza.

Who else should be vaccinated?

- People who care for or are in close contact with at-risk individuals, are also advised to protect themselves against influenza to avoid passing on the disease.

Vaccination is also recommended for many otherwise healthy Australians who wish to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza.

How can you reduce your risk of catching influenza?

There are a number of things people can do to protect themselves against influenza:

- Vaccination is the single most effective way of protecting yourself against influenza infection
- Hand washing and personal hygiene, such as trying not to touch your mouth or nose are also important preventative measures
- Where possible, avoid crowds when influenza is prevalent

Note: In controlled clinical trials remedies such as vitamin C and Echinacea have failed to show any benefit in preventing influenza.

A new influenza vaccine with an updated formulation is produced every year, to ensure that Australians are given the best possible protection. The vaccine protects people against three strains of influenza which the WHO identifies as the most likely to cause outbreaks for that season.

- The WHO has recommended that vaccines for use in the 2010 southern hemisphere influenza season contain the following three strains:¹¹
 - An A/California/7/2009 (H1N1)-like virus;
 - An A/Perth/16/2009 (H3N2)-like virus;
 - A B/Brisbane/60/2008-like virus.
- For most parts of Australia influenza vaccination is best carried out in the autumn, before serious outbreaks begin to occur.² The majority of infections occur between July-September.¹²
- In the far north of Australia influenza outbreaks can occur early in the year and vaccination should be practiced as early as possible.
- No vaccine is 100% effective. However, clinical trials have shown that influenza vaccination is very effective in protecting against the severe consequences of infection. In healthy adults the vaccine has been shown to be 70-90% effective in protecting against infection.²

What can you do if you fall ill with influenza?

- Influenza is highly contagious and can be spread for up to a day before symptoms appear and for five days afterwards.² Ways to avoid spreading influenza include:
 - Wash your hands regularly
 - Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
 - Avoid physical contact with others
 - Avoid mixing with other people, particularly those in a high-risk category, while contagious
 - Don't return to work early, you could still be contagious
- Antiviral medications that can limit the effect of influenza if they are taken early after onset of symptoms (within the first two days of the illness) are available on prescription.
- Therefore, it is important that you see your GP immediately if you believe that you are suffering influenza and wish to reduce the duration of your illness.

If you would like any further information please contact:

	Charlotte Ferrand	Sarah Cornhill
Phone:	(02) 9928 1579 / 0406 578 771	(02) 9928 1504 / 0408 978 629
Email:	charlotte.ferrand@bm.com	sarah.cornhill@bm.com

References

- ¹ National Institute of Clinical Studies. *Flu Facts*. Last viewed: March 2009. Available at: <http://www.fightflu.gov.au/asp/index.asp?sid=2118&page=influenza>
- ² NHMRC. *The Australian Immunisation Handbook 9th Edition* 2008. Available at: <http://immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/Handbook-home>
- ³ Newall AT, Wood JG, MacIntyre CR. Influenza-related hospitalisation and death in Australians aged 50 years and older *Vaccine* 2008;**051**:3
- ⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. 3303.0 - *Causes of Death, Australia*. 2007. Available at <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3303.02007?OpenDocument>
- ⁵ World Health Organization. *Fact Sheet No 211*. Revised March 2003. Available at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs211/en/>
- ⁶ Newall AT, Scuffham PA, Hodgkinson B. *Economic report into the cost of influenza to the Australian health system*. 2007 March. Available at: www.influenzaspecialistgroup.org.au
- ⁷ Neuzil KM, Hohlbein C, Zhu Y. Illness Among Schoolchildren During Influenza Season. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2002;**156**:986-991
- ⁸ Weber T.P., Stilianakis N.I. Inactivation of influenza A viruses in the environment and modes of transmission: A critical review. *Journal of Infection* 2008;**57**:361-373.
- ⁹ Bean B, Moore BM, Sterner B *et al*. Survival of influenza virus on environmental surfaces. *J Infect Dis* July 1982;**146**(1):47-51
- ¹⁰ Grayson LM, Melvani S, Druce J *et al*, Efficacy of soap and water and alcohol-based hand-rub preparations against live H1N1 influenza virus on the hands of human volunteers. *CID* 2009;**48**:289
- ¹¹ World Health Organization. *Recommended composition of influenza virus vaccines for use in the 2010 southern hemisphere influenza season*. September 2009. Available at: http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/200909_Recommendation.pdf
- ¹² Australian Department of Health and Ageing. *National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System. Number of notifications of influenza (laboratory confirmed), Australia, 2006 by age group and sex*. Cited 20/02/07. Available at: http://www9.health.gov.au/cda/Source/Rpt_5.cfm