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Community information: Influenza A(H1N1) and heart disease

The Influenza Specialist Group and the Heart Foundation have warned that Australians suffering from heart disease need to remain vigilant against influenza this season. Influenza is a potentially serious illness which can cause complications for people with underlying medical conditions including heart disease; which is one of Australia's most common health problems.¹ Studies have shown that people with pre-existing medical 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.²

The recent deaths caused by pandemic A(H1N1) influenza overseas among people with underlying medical conditions highlights the potential severity of influenza; and the need for Australians with underlying medical conditions to protect themselves this season.

In response to the pandemic A(H1N1) influenza outbreaks, the Australian Government has moved Australia to a new response phase with an emphasis on treating and caring for people vulnerable to severe infection.³ As part of the new phase known as PROTECT, testing and use of antiviral treatments will be prioritised for people with underlying medical conditions, including heart disease, after appropriate clinical assessment.³ In addition, Government funding has been allocated to develop a pandemic A(H1N1) influenza vaccine, which should be available within the next couple of months for people most at risk of spreading the virus and those most at risk of complications.⁴

In the interim, people can be vaccinated against seasonal influenza and can take simple precautionary measures to protect themselves and minimise the spread of the disease in the community. These measures include: avoid crowds where possible when influenza is prevalent, hand washing and personal hygiene (e.g. such as trying not to touch your mouth or nose).

Vaccinations

The Influenza Specialist Group and the Heart Foundation support annual influenza vaccination of Australians with underlying medical conditions in-line with current NHMRC Australian immunisation guidelines.⁵ Influenza vaccination is the single most important measure in preventing or attenuating influenza infection and preventing mortality.

Steps to take

It is important that anyone with an underlying medical condition, such as heart disease, do the following:

- **Prepare:** consult with your GP now to discuss seasonal influenza vaccination, as it takes up to two weeks for full immunity to develop following vaccination. You should also contact your GP once the pandemic A(H1N1) vaccine becomes available in the coming months.
- **Respond quickly to infection:** if you develop influenza-like symptoms contact your GP immediately. In addition, you should also speak with your GP if you have a severe underlying medical condition and someone in close contact with you develops influenza, to discuss preventative measures and methods to ensure your medical condition remains stable.

Background Information:

- In Australia heart disease affects 3.7 million people, all of whom are at-risk of serious complications from influenza.¹
- If anyone is concerned about their health they should contact the Department of Health and Ageing national pandemic A(H1N1) influenza hotline on 180 2007.
- The NHMRC strongly recommends annual influenza vaccination for:⁵
 - All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ≥15 years of age
 - People over the age of six months with chronic conditions (e.g. heart conditions, asthma and other lung conditions, diabetes(type 1 and type 2), kidney disease, impaired immunity and neurological disorders)
 - Pregnant women
 - Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
 - Healthcare professionals
 - People who care for or are in close contact with at-risk individuals

Vaccination is also recommended for anyone aged six months or over, who wishes to reduce their risk of becoming ill with influenza.⁵

References:

1. Heart Foundation, Cardiovascular Disease Statistics, Available at: http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/Heart_Information/Statistics/Pages/default.aspx
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3. Australian Government Department of Health & Ageing, New Pandemic Phase PROTECT, Available at: <http://www.healthemergency.gov.au/internet/healthemergency/publishing.nsf/Content/news-170609n>
4. Australian Government Department of Health & Ageing, H1N1 Outbreaks, Available at: http://www.healthemergency.gov.au/internet/healthemergency/publishing.nsf/Content/health-swine_influenza-index.htm
5. National Health and Medical Research Council, *The Australian Immunisation Handbook 9th Edition* 2008, Available at: <http://immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/Handbook-home>