

Flu (influenza) - immunisation

Influenza, commonly known as the flu, is caused by a highly contagious virus that is spread by coughs and sneezes. Every year it causes widespread illness in the community (epidemics and pandemics). Annual immunisation is recommended for older people and those 'at risk' to avoid serious complications, such as pneumonia, that may arise as a result of contracting the virus.

Influenza epidemics occur, on average, every three years. An epidemic is an increased incidence of the disease among a group of people, for example the elderly. Influenza pandemics have occurred four times in the past 100 years. A pandemic describes the disease when it affects a large proportion of people in a geographic region or continent.

Serious side effects or allergic reactions to the vaccine are rare. If you are concerned about your reaction or your child's reaction to any vaccine, see your doctor immediately.

Immunisation can prevent serious complications from influenza

Influenza viruses change every year because the influenza virus has a unique ability to change its surface structure. This allows it to escape recognition by the body's immune system. So a new vaccine needs to be developed and given each year. In Victoria the 2011 seasonal influenza vaccine includes protection against the pandemic H1N1 strain.

Immunisation should occur between March and May, before the onset of the flu season. Most cases of influenza occur within a six to eight-week period during winter and spring. Protection develops about two weeks after the injection and lasts for up to one year.

Influenza vaccine cannot give you a dose of flu because it contains no live virus. However, some people may still contract the flu because the vaccine may not always protect against all strains of the influenza virus circulating in the community.

High risk groups should be immunised against the flu

In Victoria, under the National Immunisation Program, an annual free influenza immunisation is provided to:

- Everyone aged 65 years and older
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over
- Pregnant women during any stage of pregnancy
- Anyone from six months of age with heart disease, chronic lung disease, chronic neurological conditions, impaired immunity and other chronic illnesses such as diabetes, kidney disease and haemoglobinopathies
- Other chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow-up or hospitalisation, for example severe asthmatics who require frequent hospital visits.

Other people who should be immunised against the flu

Immunisation is also recommended (but not necessarily free) for people who can put vulnerable people at risk of infection. People who work with or live in close contact with people who have an underlying medical condition or reduced immunity are also recommended to be vaccinated to avoid spreading the virus and to protect themselves and their family. They include:

- Public and private hospital staff who provide direct care to patients
- Staff in long-term care facilities or nursing homes
- People who live with, or care for someone who has a chronic illness or is aged
- Carers of homeless people

- Workers, particularly those in workplaces that provide essential services
- People who work with children
- People involved in the commercial poultry and pig industry
- Workers in other 'high risk' industries
- Anyone travelling as part of a group.

Pregnancy and immunisation

Influenza vaccine is recommended for women planning a pregnancy and for pregnant women at anytime during the pregnancy.

Before immunisation for influenza

Before receiving the vaccine, make sure that you tell your doctor or nurse if you or your child:

- Is unwell (temperature over 38.5°C)
- Has had a serious reaction to any vaccine
- Has had a severe allergy to anything
- Has had an anaphylactic allergy to eggs – this is because the virus used in the vaccine is grown in eggs
- Is under six months of age
- Has had Guillain-Barre syndrome.

Possible side effects of the flu vaccine

The influenza vaccine can cause a range of side effects. In children under five years of age, these reactions may be more obvious. Common side effects include:

- Pain, redness and swelling at the injection site
- Low-grade fever
- Muscle aches
- Drowsiness or tiredness.

If mild reactions do occur, they may last one to two days. Severe side effects are extremely rare. If you are concerned, contact your doctor or hospital.

Reducing side effects

Side effects usually resolve quickly. However, there are a number of treatment options that can reduce the side effects of the vaccine:

- A cold, wet cloth placed over the injection site
- Paracetamol to reduce any fever – check the label for the correct dose (especially for children)
- If there is a fever give extra fluids to drink and do not overdress

If reactions are severe and persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor for further information.

Febrile convulsions in children

In 2010, one brand of influenza vaccine caused an increase in fever and febrile convulsions in very young children under five years of age. Current advice from the Australian Government is that this reaction is uncommon and that, on balance, the benefits of flu vaccination outweigh the risks in most children. Your doctor will discuss with you the best influenza vaccine brand for your child.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local council immunisation service

- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Your local community health centre
- Immunisation Section, Department of Health Victoria Tel. 1300 882 008
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- National Immunisation Hotline Tel. 1800 671 811

Things to remember

- Influenza is an epidemic disease that causes widespread illness every year.
- Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high risk groups.
- The vaccine cannot give you a dose of flu because it contains no live virus.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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