
You never forget the flu.

Flu (influenza)

Summary

- Influenza is a viral disease that causes widespread illness every year.
 - Immunising people who are at risk of complications from the flu is the most important way we have to reduce the number of flu infections and deaths.
 - Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high-risk groups.
 - People who work or live with people who are at risk of serious complications should also be immunised to avoid spreading the flu.
 - The vaccine cannot give you a dose of flu because it does not contain any live virus.
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The flu is a highly contagious viral infection that can cause severe illness and life-threatening complications, including pneumonia. The flu is spread by contact with fluids from coughs and sneezes.

It is estimated that flu contributes to over 3,000 deaths in Australia each year.

The "swine flu" virus – also known as influenza A (H1N1) – emerged in 2009 and caused the first influenza pandemic in more than 40 years. However, it is now a regular human flu virus that continues to circulate seasonally worldwide. The current seasonal influenza vaccine has been designed to include protection against the swine flu virus.

Do I have the flu?

The most common symptoms of the flu are:

- sudden appearance of a high fever (38 °C or more)
- a dry cough
- body aches (especially in the head, lower back and legs)
- feeling extremely weak and tired (and not wanting to get out of bed).

Other symptoms can be:

- chills
- aching behind the eyes
- loss of appetite
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose.

Having the flu is even more likely if you have been in contact with someone who already has it, or have had some other type of exposure such as overseas travel to areas where flu outbreaks are occurring.

Whether you have the flu or another kind of virus can only be confirmed by a doctor after a nose or throat swab has returned positive results. The treatment is similar for any 'flu-like' illness, but a diagnosis is useful in helping health officials track disease patterns and frequency and will be required where complications have developed.

What to expect with the flu

Symptoms of the flu hit very quickly and may last for several weeks. A bout of the flu typically follows this pattern:

- Days 1–3: Sudden appearance of fever, headache, muscle pain and weakness, dry cough, sore throat and sometimes a stuffy nose.
 - Day 4: Fever and muscle aches decrease. Hoarse, dry or sore throat, cough and possible mild chest
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discomfort become more noticeable. You may feel tired or flat.

- Day 8: Symptoms decrease. Cough and tiredness may last one to two weeks or more.

What about flu complications?

In some cases of the flu, severe illness and complications such as pneumonia and bronchitis can develop, which can result in hospitalisation and even death. The flu can also make some existing medical conditions worse.

Some people are at higher risk of severe complications associated with the flu. They include:

- pregnant women
- people aged over 65
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- all children younger than five years of age
- people with chronic medical conditions.

How can I avoid the flu?

Annual immunisation against the flu is recommended for all people from six months of age. Many people in the above groups are eligible for free flu vaccination each year (in autumn) under the National Immunisation Program and the Victorian government funded vaccine program for children aged six months to less than five years.

The vaccine is not 100 per cent effective but it does provide a high level of protection and can reduce symptoms in those still getting sick.

Anyone in these at-risk groups with flu-like symptoms should see their doctor as soon as possible.

I think I have the flu – should I see a doctor?

Most people who are generally healthy won't need to see their doctor for the flu. Their immune system will fight the infection and their symptoms will usually clear up on their own.

If you think you have the flu, try to rest, maintain a good fluid intake, and manage your symptoms. This will help you recover and prevent dehydration.

See your doctor if you are concerned, and seek **immediate medical attention** if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- difficulty breathing
- chest pain
- sudden dizziness
- confusion
- severe vomiting
- fever with a rash.

How can I avoid giving the flu to other people?

Most (otherwise healthy) adults will be able to infect other people up to seven days after becoming sick, so the best way to avoid spreading the flu is to stay at home while you are unwell. In particular, avoid going to work or school or visiting busy public places. Avoid sharing linens, eating utensils and dishes.

Perform good cough etiquette at all times. This includes coughing into a tissue and disposing of it immediately, or coughing into your sleeve.

Good hand hygiene is also important. Wash your hands regularly using soap and water, particularly if you cough into your hands.

What medications should I take for the flu?

The flu is a viral infection so **antibiotics won't help at all** and should not be taken.

Antiviral medications, if started in the first two days after your symptoms start, can shorten the length of your illness. These will need to be prescribed by your doctor.

Decongestants and simple pain relievers can help you feel better while your body's immune system fights off the infection.

Follow these tips for buying over-the-counter medication for the flu:

- Buy a remedy that treats only one symptom; this way you are not taking in substances that you do not need, or that may trigger an adverse reaction.
- Read the label to check:
 - whether the active ingredient treats your symptoms
 - any possible side effects of the medication
 - any possible interactions the medication may have with any other medications you are taking, including over-the-counter, prescription, and alternative medicines (for example, herbal medicines)
 - if the medication is safe for you to take with any other health conditions you have.
- If you are unsure if a medication is suitable for you to take, or if you have any other questions, talk to your doctor or pharmacist. They can suggest a medication that is appropriate and safe for you to take.

Looking after yourself when you have the flu

The best things you can do to look after yourself when you have the flu are:

- Rest – you will probably feel very weak and tired until your temperature returns to normal (about three days), and resting will provide comfort and allow your body to use its energy to fight the infection
- Stay at home – stay away from work or school and avoid contact with others as much as possible while the infection is contagious. The period during which adults are contagious is usually around 3–5 days from when the first symptoms appear, and up to 7 days in younger children.
- Drink plenty of fluids – extra fluids are needed to replace those lost because of the fever (through sweating). If your urine is dark, you need to drink more. Try to drink a glass of fluids, such as water, every hour while you are awake.

Other useful tips for flu recovery

Other useful flu recovery tips include:

- Take simple pain-relieving medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, as directed on the packet, to ease muscle pain and bring down your fever (unless your doctor says otherwise).
- Do not give any medications that contain aspirin to children under 18 years of age with flu. The combination of the flu and aspirin in children has been known to cause **Reye's syndrome** – a very serious condition affecting the nervous system and liver.
- Antibiotics are not effective against the flu because the flu is a virus, and antibiotics fight bacteria. However, your doctor may prescribe them if you develop a bacterial infection on top of your flu.
- Gargle with a glass of warm water to ease a sore throat. Sucking on sugar-free lollies or lozenges also helps.
- A hot water bottle or heating pad may help relieve muscle pain. A warm bath may also be soothing.
- Use saline nose drops or spray to help soothe or clear a stuffy nose. These decongestants help shrink swollen blood vessels in the nose. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about which medication will be the best one for you.
- Do not smoke – this will irritate your damaged airways.
- Try warm, moist air inhalation. Boil a kettle and put the water in a bowl on a table. Put your head over the bowl with a towel over your head and inhale the warm air for up to 20 minutes. Don't put anything in the water.
- Ask for help if you live alone, are a single parent, or are responsible for the care of someone who is frail or disabled. You may need to call someone to help you until you are feeling better.
- Remember, if you buy medicine at the pharmacy to treat your symptoms (over-the-counter medications), check with the pharmacist to see if it is the best one for you. Mention if you have a chronic illness or are taking any other medication.

Where to get help

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist
- **Immunise Australia Program**

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

Department of Health and Human Services - RHP&R - Health Protection - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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