

Short window remaining to get flu shot this year – available April 20

At-risk groups urged to book a #flushotnow with flu on rise

Australia's leading influenza expert body is urging Australians to "book a flu shot now", with influenza cases already at significantly higher levels recorded than this time last year.

The government-funded flu vaccine for at-risk groups will be made available from April 20, a month later than usual, due to manufacturing delays with incorporating two new strains into the vaccine.

The Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) is warning the late start to the flu vaccination season is leaving Australians with close to six weeks to get vaccinated before winter.

According to Dr Alan Hampson, Chair, ISG, the most recent, serious influenza cases in the Northern hemisphere were caused by the A(H3N2) virus, which emerged as the predominant, circulating strain during the five-to-six month vaccine manufacturing period. This virus type, which has historically, been associated with increased severity among the elderly, has also severely impacted all age groups.

"The 2015 Southern Hemisphere free flu vaccine contains two new strains, including the H3N2 influenza strain, which has been responsible for a severe flu season and high flu hospitalisation rates in the Northern Hemisphere, and the late outbreaks of influenza B in Europe.

"All indications are that our vaccine is now a really good match for the coming Australian flu season," said Dr Hampson.

"Higher baseline levels of flu have, however, continued throughout our summer, and during the first three months of 2015, have actually been at the highest levels recorded for this time of year.

"Cases usually rise sharply in June, with a peak in August, so there's only about a six-week optimum period to vaccinate against flu this year," Dr Hampson said.

In 2014, almost 68,000 laboratory confirmed cases of flu were recorded, the highest number of notified flu cases in Australia in any year to date. As of March, 2015, 4,381 flu cases had been recorded, compared to 3,838 at the same time last year.

"What's important to note is that laboratory confirmed cases are the tip of the iceberg and probably represent less than five per cent of total flu cases in Australia," said Dr Hampson.

New ISG flu research reveals approximately 2.3 million* Australians (25 per cent) aged 35-to-64 have underlying medical conditions that may place them at increased risk of severe complications, should they contract influenza. Yet disturbingly, more than one-in-three of these Australians (34 per cent) with one or more risk factors do not plan to vaccinate against flu this year, nor are they concerned that a flu infection could lead to severe complications or hospitalisation.

Complacency is particularly high among Australians aged 35-to-44 years with only 17 per cent citing they were 'very concerned' that severe flu could lead to complications.

Professor Robert Booy, Director, ISG and vaccine and infectious diseases expert, Sydney, says the new research demonstrates messages regarding the risks associated with influenza are still not getting through to all members of the community.

"New research among working Australians aged 35-44 years shows only one-in-six realise that flu can be severe and cause hospitalisation. Disturbingly, this reveals most people are inadequately concerned about flu," Prof Booy said.

ISG data indicates between 1,500-to-3,500 influenza-related deaths occur in Australia each year, which is higher than the national road death toll. Furthermore, an estimated 18,000 Australians are hospitalised with influenza-related illness per annum.

"Flu clearly affects quality of life and may lead to serious health complications," said Prof Booy, with almost three-in-four Australians claiming to miss out on important life activities and events with the flu, including going to work (57 per cent) and catching up with friends for dinner (37 per cent).

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Mother-to-three and grandmother-to-five, Sheena, 71, Melbourne, is a chronic asthmatic who endures ongoing problems with her lungs. In October last year, she visited her doctor, complaining of a racing heart and breathlessness. She was subsequently raced to hospital via ambulance, diagnosed with influenza B and placed in isolation in the intensive care unit, where she stayed for a week. Following a 10 day stint in hospital, she returned home, feeling fatigued. Five days later, she was re-hospitalised with another viral infection. A week later she arrived home, and has been trying to mount a full recovery ever since.

“I had no idea I had contracted influenza, because I didn’t have a cough or a runny nose.

“I felt very weak and extremely tired. I couldn’t breathe properly and my muscles were aching. The virus really knocked me around,” Sheena said.

Sheena, who is at-risk of influenza, plans to have an annual flu shot as soon as she “picks up a bit”. She is also encouraging her children, and all of their children, to have an annual flu shot too, to protect against the potentially devastating respiratory infection.

“Our message to the community is simple – book a #flushotnow before the influenza season hits,” said Dr Hampson.

“It’s going to be very busy this year. Along with the delay in flu vaccine supply, the Government has extended free vaccination to young indigenous children, which is really important, because they are even more likely to require hospitalisation than non-indigenous children.”

For more information about influenza, visit www.isg.org.au or www.flusmart.org.au.

About influenza

Influenza, commonly known as ‘the flu’, is a highly contagious illness. The virus is transmitted easily from person-to-person via droplets and small particles produced when infected people cough or sneeze, and through hand contact with contaminated surfaces. Influenza is characterised by a sudden high fever, cough (usually dry), headache, muscle and joint pain, feeling unwell, and sore throat. Each year, influenza causes more than 18,000 hospitalisations and 300,000 GP consultations in Australia, and costs the Australian healthcare system \$85 million. Research shows healthy working adults vaccinated against influenza have nearly half the number of doctor’s visits and sick days due to upper respiratory illness, compared to those unvaccinated.

About the ISG

The ISG is a not-for-profit organisation and well established as Australia’s leading independent expert body on influenza and influenza vaccination. The organisation was born in 1990 in response to influenza vaccine shortages and the group of medical and scientific specialists from around Australia are dedicated to protecting Australians from the effects of influenza. The ISG’s Influenza Awareness Program is developed each year at the annual ISG Scientific Meeting, ensuring the program’s content and focus is relevant and up to date. Launched in 1992, the Influenza Awareness Program has been continued by the ISG in conjunction with high profile professional organisations such as the Australian Medical Association and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. The campaign further enlists the support of major patient advocacy groups, such as the Asthma Council Australia, Heart Foundation and Diabetes Australia to target specific at-risk Australians.

*Based on ABS statistics as at June 2014. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/1CD2B1952AFC5E7ACA257298000F2E76?OpenDocument>

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Issued by the Influenza Specialist Group (ISG).

MEDIA CONTACTS: [Kirsten Bruce, 0401 717 566; Ruby Archis, 0413 834 906](mailto:kirsten.bruce@isg.org.au)

MEDIA KIT: [Available for download MON, APRIL 13, 2015 from flushotnow.org](http://www.flushotnow.org)

BROADCAST VISION: [Available via satellite feed @ 9:15am AEST on MON, APRIL 13 from 7 Network \(SYD\) – please record & ask Ch 7 in your capital city to on-pass, if an affiliate](http://www.7network.com.au)

To learn more:

- Visit www.isg.org.au, or
- www.flusmart.org.au

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