

Flu Virus and People with Chronic Kidney Disease

Commonly known as 'the flu', influenza is a highly contagious disease that can be serious, debilitating and affect the whole body. The flu is caused by a particular group of viruses and is spread by infected people coughing or sneezing as well as from surfaces contaminated by respiratory secretions. Even laughing, talking and breathing can disperse the flu virus. But it's no laughing matter. Influenza can cause serious illness, particularly in people with underlying medical conditions, older adults, pregnant women and young children. Many people confuse the common cold with influenza; however, colds are much less severe.

Flu symptoms include:

- fever (often high)
- chills
- severe cough
- headaches
- muscle aches and pains
- sore throat
- children's symptoms may also include nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.

Children and adults with chronic kidney disease (CKD) and kidney transplant recipients are high risk groups for infection from the flu virus including H1N1 and should, therefore, consider vaccination (1, 2).

How serious is seasonal influenza?

- Influenza is a potentially fatal disease that is estimated to cause more deaths than accidents on roads: up to 3500 influenza deaths annually.(3,4)
- Experts estimate that influenza in Australia causes more than 18,000 hospitalisations and 300,000 GP consultations per year.(5)
- Between 5% and 20% of the Australian population may be infected with influenza each year. (6)
- Children are much more likely to contract influenza in any given season: 20-50% compared with 10-30% in adults. Up to 70% of children become infected with the virus during a pandemic (7)

Are people with chronic kidney disease at increased risk?

The answer is yes, they are at increased risk of becoming seriously ill, being hospitalised and even dying if they contract influenza. There are a number of reasons for this:

- In chronic kidney disease elements of the immune system that deal with infections like influenza are less active therefore their recovery is compromised. (1)
- Influenza infection predisposes to infection with pneumococcal bacteria which pose an additional serious risk to kidney disease sufferers (pneumococcal vaccination is also important in this group) (8).
- Those suffering CKD are likely to have other diagnosed or undiagnosed risk factors that can lead to poor outcomes from infection.(9)

How to protect yourself from infection

- Vaccination is the single most effective way for anyone to protect themselves against influenza infection.

- It has been shown that in CKD sufferers, including renal dialysis patients, influenza vaccination reduces the number and severity of influenza infections that they will suffer and reduces the number of hospitalisations and deaths.(8, 10)
- Other important things in protecting yourself are:
 - Wash your hands often and thoroughly with soap and warm water, or use a hand sanitizer.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. You can get infected by touching something that is contaminated with influenza and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - Follow good health habits: get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious food.

Influenza is highly contagious and can be spread for up to a day before symptoms appear and for up to five days afterwards (11).

Eleven ways to aid recovery and avoid spreading influenza for people with chronic kidney disease

1. Contact your renal unit immediately to receive further advice.
2. stay home
3. rest and keep warm
4. consume plenty of liquids
5. do not consume alcohol
6. wash hands regularly
7. cover nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
8. avoid physical contact with others
9. avoid mixing with other people, particularly those in a high-risk category, while contagious
10. stop smoking or cut your consumption down as much as you can
11. ensure someone checks on you and does your shopping
12. do not return to work early, you could still be contagious.

Antiviral medications can limit the effect of influenza if they are taken early after onset of symptoms (within the first two days of the illness). They are available on prescription only. Therefore, it is important to see your GP immediately if you believe you're suffering influenza and wish to reduce the duration of your illness.

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