

Fact Sheet: Influenza

What is influenza?

- Influenza is a serious, often debilitating illness of which the affects are felt throughout the whole body. Symptoms include fever, headaches, muscle aches and pains.¹
- Healthy young adults may take several weeks to fully recover from influenza, and for some people it can lead to hospitalisation or even death.
- Many people confuse the common cold with influenza. However, colds have much less potential for severe or life-threatening illness.

How serious is seasonal influenza?

- It is estimated that at least 2,500 Australians die from influenza and its complications every year in Australia.²
- It has been estimated that in the 20th century more people died from annual seasonal influenza than in the three influenza pandemics,³ and every year twice as many Australians die of influenza and pneumonia than in traffic accidents.⁴
- The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that worldwide there are between three and five million cases of seasonal influenza annually and between 250,000 and 500,000 deaths.⁵

How contagious is influenza?

- Influenza is highly contagious. After someone coughs or sneezes the virus can survive for:
 - Up to an hour in the air in enclosed environments⁶
 - More than eight hours on hard surfaces such as stainless steel and plastic⁶
 - Up to five minutes on hands after transfer from other surfaces⁷

Who is at particular risk of complications from influenza?

- People at particular risk of severe complications from influenza are those with:⁸
 - Heart conditions
 - Asthma and other lung conditions
 - Diabetes (type 1 and type 2)
 - Kidney problems
 - Impaired immunity
 - *Note:* 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.⁹
- People over 65 years of age, residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island adults aged 15 years and over are also at increased risk of severe complications from influenza.⁸
- People who care for, or are in close contact with individuals who are at particular risk, are also advised to protect themselves against infection to avoid passing on the disease.
- Many otherwise healthy Australians can ill-afford to get influenza, such as those who are self-employed, single parents, carers or people who can't afford to take any time off work. Contracting influenza could mean important activities are missed, resulting in unnecessary suffering as well as economic hardship for many Australians.

How does influenza impact Australian healthcare systems?

- It is estimated that on average, influenza-like illness annually:¹⁰
 - Causes 18,000 hospitalisations
 - Requires over 300,000 GP consultations
 - Directly costs the Australian Government at least \$85m – a cost that is largely preventable and primarily borne by the Australian tax payer.
 - Healthcare resources can often be further stretched as currently only around 20-50% of healthcare workers are vaccinated against influenza. This not only puts them at risk of contracting the disease, but also of spreading the disease to their vulnerable patients.
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How can you reduce your risk of catching influenza?

There are a number of things people can do to protect themselves against influenza:

- Vaccination is the single most effective way of protecting yourself against influenza infection
- Hand washing and personal hygiene, such as trying not to touch your mouth or nose are also important preventative measures
- Where possible, avoid crowds when influenza is prevalent

Note: In controlled clinical trials remedies such as vitamin C and echinacea have failed to show any benefit in preventing influenza.

- A new influenza vaccine, with an updated formulation is produced every year to ensure that Australians are given the best possible protection. The vaccine protects people against three strains of influenza which the WHO identifies as the most likely to cause outbreaks for that season.
- The 2008 Southern Hemisphere influenza vaccine contains the following three influenza strains:
 - A/Solomon Islands/3/2006 – like strain
 - A/Brisbane/10/2007 – like strain
 - B/Florida/4/2006 – like strain
- No vaccine is 100% effective; however, clinical trials have shown that influenza vaccination is very effective in protecting against the severe consequences of infection. In healthy adults the vaccine has been shown to be 70-90% effective in protecting against infection.⁸
- For most parts of Australia influenza vaccination is best carried out in the autumn, before serious outbreaks begin to occur.⁸ The majority of infections occur between July-September.¹¹
- In the far north of Australia influenza outbreaks can occur early in the year and vaccination should be practiced as early as possible.

What can you do if you fall ill with influenza?

- Influenza is highly contagious and can be spread for up to a day before symptoms appear and for five days afterwards.⁸ Ways to avoid spreading influenza include:
 - Wash your hands regularly
 - Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
 - Avoid physical contact with others
 - Avoid mixing with other people, particularly those in a high-risk category, while contagious
 - Don't return to work early, you could still be contagious
- Antiviral medications that can limit the effect of influenza if they are taken early after onset of symptoms (within the first two days of the illness) are available on prescription.
- Therefore, it is important that you see your GP immediately if you believe that you are suffering influenza and wish to reduce the duration of your illness.

Avian influenza update:*

- The first human cases during the current spread of H5N1 avian influenza in poultry were reported in Vietnam in December 2003.
- To date there have been a total of 240 confirmed deaths from avian influenza worldwide, with a majority of cases being reported from Indonesia, South East Asia and the Middle-East
- H5N1 avian influenza has not yet been detected in birds or humans in Australia; however, it is important that we remain vigilant, particularly due to our close proximity to Asia.
- While there have been instances of limited person to person transmission of the H5N1 virus in families, all evidence to date indicates that close contact with dead or sick birds is the principle source of human infection. However, there is ongoing concern that the H5N1 virus could acquire the ability to pass from person to person and therefore poses a potential pandemic threat.

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