



Flu (influenza)

- **Influenza (flu) is a common, highly contagious virus that affects the respiratory system.**
- **The virus can cause a mild to serious illness and even death in young children, older adults and vulnerable people.**
- **Getting the flu vaccine is your best protection against the flu. Protect yourself and your family.**

The flu is not the same as the common cold.

There are two basic types of flu – A and B – that cause illness in people.

These are called the seasonal flu viruses, as they emerge each year, mostly in the winter months.

Terms explained

Flu season – this is an annually-recurring time period characterised by the prevalence of outbreaks of influenza (flu). The season occurs during the colder months of the year.

Flu pandemic – this is a global outbreak of flu. It occurs when a new strain of the flu virus, against which people have little or no immunity, spreads quickly from person-to-person.

How do you get the flu?

The flu virus is spread through the air when someone coughs, sneezes or talks.

You can also catch the flu from touching a contaminated surface with the flu virus on it, and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose.

Notifiable disease

Influenza is a notifiable disease. This means doctors, hospitals and laboratories must inform the Department of Health of your diagnosis. This allows the Department to monitor the extent of influenza cases in our community and to take necessary action in some situations, for example outbreaks in day care or aged care centres. Notification is confidential.

Who is most at risk?

Flu can be a serious illness for older people, young children, pregnant women, or people of any age who have a chronic medical condition, such as heart disease or diabetes.

Most influenza cases occur in children less than 4, pregnant women and in people over 60.

If you are in one of the groups above, you:

- are strongly encouraged to get vaccinated against flu
- should seek medical attention if you develop flu-like symptoms.

Pregnant women

If you are pregnant you are at an increased risk of developing serious health complications from the flu such as pneumonia, compared to women who are not pregnant.

Babies and young children

Anyone can get the flu, but rates of infection and hospitalisation are highest among young children and people over 65.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Most healthy children and adults only have minor symptoms.

Typical symptoms in adults can include:

- sudden onset of fever
- headache
- sore throat



- runny nose
- cough
- fatigue (tiredness)
- general aches and pains
- nose, throat and lung congestion.

Most people recover within a few days, but in some people with existing medical conditions more serious infections can occur such as pneumonia or inflammation of the lungs, resulting in a much longer illness.

Flu symptoms in children

Flu symptoms in children can include symptoms which are more uncommon in adults, such as:

- nausea (feeling sick)
- vomiting
- diarrhoea.

You should see your doctor urgently if your child’s health worsens or you notice new symptoms developing.

Signs to watch for include:

- fast breathing or difficulty breathing
- skin starts to turn blue
- refusal to eat or drink
- not waking up properly or not interacting
- being extremely irritable, and not wanting to be held
- fever and a rash
- persistent vomiting.

People at high risk

It’s important for people at higher risk of developing a serious illness or health complications from flu to see a doctor immediately for a medical diagnosis.

If you only have mild symptoms, you should stay at home until you are feeling better.

See a doctor if you start experiencing the following symptoms:

- fast breathing or difficulty breathing
- skin starting to turn blue
- pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- sudden dizziness
- confusion
- a rash
- persistent vomiting.

In some cases the flu-like symptoms can improve but then return with a fever and a worse cough.

What is the difference between the flu and a cold?

Although influenza symptoms are similar to a cold symptoms (especially in children), the flu virus is more incapacitating and lasts much longer than a cold.

Table: Understanding the differences between cold and flu symptoms

Symptom	Influenza	Cold
Headache and aches and pains	Common May be less severe	Rare
Fatigue and weakness	Common Last days	Uncommon Usually mild
Runny/stuffy nose	Uncommon	Common
Sore throat	Uncommon	Common
Cough	Common Dry or moist	Common Moist



How do you treat the flu?

Usually someone with influenza will recover naturally within 2 to 7 days.

If you have mild symptoms and are not at increased risk of developing severe illness from the flu, you should stay at home and rest until you are well.

The recommended treatment for mild to moderate flu is to:

- Take paracetamol to help reduce fever and head and muscle aches.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat healthy food.

Decongestants and other cold remedies will not help and antibiotics do not treat influenza unless you have secondary bacterial infection (which must be diagnosed by a doctor).

Antiviral medication can help to manage your illness but only if you are treated early, within 12 to 48 hours of showing flu symptoms. Flu is not usually diagnosed within this period, so it is not commonly used (except in special circumstances).

While you have the flu

- Stay home from school or work and avoid contact with other people.
- Wash your hands often, especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose and before you prepare any food.
- Use disposable tissues and immediately throw used tissues in the bin.
- Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze.

How can the flu be prevented?

The best way to prevent catching the flu is to have the flu vaccination.

Follow these tips to help avoid, or to stop yourself giving it to others:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Throw used tissues in the bin.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use antibacterial hand sanitisers, especially after you cough.
- Try to avoid close contact with people who have flu symptoms.
- If you have the flu, stay home from work or school and limit your contact with other people.

Learn more about hand hygiene and protecting yourself from the flu.

Is there a flu vaccine?

Yes. The flu vaccine protects people against the flu virus and the common complications of this infection. Each year a new vaccine containing the 3 most common strains of circulating influenza viruses is produced.

The flu vaccine is available in metropolitan and country WA from immunisation providers including GP clinics, community health clinics and Aboriginal Medical Services.

Find out more about flu vaccination. For further information, contact your GP or immunisation provider.

Who should be immunised against the flu?

Under the Australian Government's Immunise Australia Program, the following people are eligible to receive the free seasonal influenza vaccine each year:

- pregnant women
- children 6 months to less than 5 years



- people 65 years and older
- Aboriginal people 6 months and older
- people 6 months and older with medical conditions that put them at risk of severe influenza including:
 - cardiac disease
 - chronic respiratory condition
 - chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow-up or hospitalisation in the previous year
 - chronic neurological conditions
 - impaired immunity
 - children 6 months to age 10 receiving long-term aspirin therapy.

Note: Some immunisation providers may charge you a consultation fee for administering the vaccine. You should check what the costs are when making an appointment.

Where to get help

- See your doctor
- Visit a GP after hours
- Visit healthdirect or call 1800 022 222
- Phone the Immunise Australia Hotline on 1800 671 811

Remember

- The flu is more severe and lasts longer than a cold.
- It is highly contagious and spread by coughing, sneezing and touching.
- The flu can lead to serious health complications which can be fatal.
- A vaccination against the flu can help protect you.

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