

Fact Sheet - Influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza (the flu) is an infectious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Influenza is not just a 'bad cold' – it is a more serious illness that may lead to complications, particularly in people with an existing medical condition.

Who gets influenza?

Anyone of any age can get influenza, no matter how fit and healthy they are. Each year between 10-20% of the population is infected with influenza.

How is influenza spread?

Influenza viruses spread mainly from person to person, by being exposed to people with influenza who are coughing and/or sneezing. You may also become infected by touching something with influenza viruses on it and then touching your mouth or nose. Adults with influenza can infect others starting from 1 day before they develop symptoms and up to 5 days after becoming sick. Children can infect others for a much longer period of time, even if they have no symptoms. So you can spread influenza to others around you from before you get sick as well as while you are sick.

How can you avoid getting influenza?

Having an influenza immunisation each year is the best protection against influenza. As influenza viruses keep changing from year to year, your natural immunity (which you develop if you have previously been infected with a particular strain or type of influenza infection) may not protect you from this year's influenza strains.

About influenza immunisation

The usual 'flu season' in New Zealand is from around May to September. The best time to have influenza immunisation is in March or April, as soon as the vaccine becomes available and before the flu season arrives, as it takes you up to two weeks to develop immunity after immunisation. Influenza immunisation cannot cause influenza because the vaccine contains no live viruses.

In New Zealand, the following groups of people are eligible for free influenza immunisation:

- Anyone aged 65 years and over.
- Anyone under 65 years of age who has certain chronic medical conditions. Conditions include cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease (including asthma, if on regular preventive medication), diabetes, chronic renal (kidney) disease, cancer (current, and excluding non-invasive skin cancers) and various other conditions. Talk to your GP (family doctor) to see if you are eligible for free influenza immunisation.

How do you know if you have influenza?

The symptoms of influenza can be similar to the symptoms of other respiratory illnesses. You can't be sure you have influenza just based on the symptoms. Your GP can do a test to see if you have influenza if you are within the first few days of the start of your illness.

What are the symptoms of influenza?

Influenza can cause mild or severe illness, and is different from a cold. Illness due to influenza usually starts suddenly, and may include the following symptoms, known as 'flu-like symptoms':

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Sore throat
- Dry cough
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Extreme tiredness
- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea can occur (but are more common in children).

Are there medicines to treat influenza?

While immunisation each year is the best protection against influenza, antiviral medicines can be recommended in some situations. Talk to your pharmacist or GP for more information.

What to do if you get sick with influenza

Most healthy people recover from influenza without complications.

- Stay at home so you are less likely to infect others.
- Rest and drink plenty of fluids.
- Take paracetamol for fever and aches.
- Remember that serious illness from influenza is more likely in people aged 65 and older, young children, pregnant women and people with certain chronic medical conditions – if in doubt, call and/or see your GP.

Emergency warning signs – get urgent medical attention if there are any of the following signs:

- Children: Rapid breathing or difficulty breathing; not drinking enough fluids; not waking up or not responding; very irritable, child does not want to be held; flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough than before; fever with a rash; severe or persistent vomiting.
- Adults: Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath; pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen; sudden dizziness; confusion; severe or persistent vomiting.

Phone Healthline or your GP for advice

If you're not sure if you have influenza or not sure if you should see your GP, you should call Healthline or call your GP. Healthline is a free, 24 hour per day telephone health advice service – call 0800 611 116.

What to do to stop the spread of influenza

- Stay away from others if you are sick.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue (or cough or sneeze into your elbow if you don't have a tissue).
- Put used tissues in the rubbish bin.
- Wash and dry your hands often – use soap.
- Keep surfaces clean at home, school and work.