

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. Pandemic influenza H1N1 (swine flu) was a new influenza strain that emerged in 2009, spread quickly around the world and is still expected to occur around the world for some time.

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, or by touching something with influenza viruses on it and then touching your mouth or nose. People with influenza can infect others, starting from before they develop symptoms, up to a week or more after becoming sick. Children can infect others for a much longer period of time, even if they have no or very mild symptoms.

How can you avoid getting influenza?

Having an influenza immunisation each year is the best protection against influenza. Annual immunisation is needed for two reasons: firstly because protection lessens over time; and secondly because, each year, influenza can be caused by different influenza viruses that were not included in the previous year's vaccine. Each year the influenza vaccine contains the three strains most likely to occur that flu season.

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 until 31 July:

- Anyone aged 65 years or over.
- Anyone aged 6 months to 64 years of age with any of the medical conditions below:
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.
- Pregnant women.

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. If clinically indicated, your GP may do a test for 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, called 'flu-like symptoms':

- Fever (38°C or higher)
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Chills
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Extreme tiredness
- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea can occur (more common in children).

Are there medicines to treat influenza?

While immunisation each year is the best protection against influenza, antiviral medicines such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) can be used to treat influenza. To be effective, the medicines must usually be started within the first 2 days (48 hours) after symptoms start. Talk to your GP or pharmacist 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. Do not give medication containing aspirin to children under 14.
- Remember that serious illness from influenza is more likely in people aged 65 and older, young children, pregnant women, people who are morbidly obese and people with certain chronic medical conditions – if in any doubt, call and/or see your GP.

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

- Children: Fast 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; seizures (convulsions).
- 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

- If you are sick, stay away from others until you are well.
- 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, or use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Keep surfaces clean at home, school and work.