

Influenza



What is Influenza?

Influenza is an infection that affects the respiratory system – your nose, throat and lungs (also known as 'airways'). It is caused by the influenza virus.

There are several forms of the virus and each can change over time. Each year scientists try to work out which form of the influenza virus is most likely to be the cause of the year's epidemic.

Many people think of influenza as 'the flu' and use this term for common illnesses like head colds. Influenza is much more serious.

Sadly sometimes influenza can be fatal, especially in older people or those with other health problems. Young people can also die from influenza.

Symptoms of Influenza

The symptoms are quite different to the common cold or other respiratory infections. They can include: fever, headache, muscular aches, sore throat, and dry cough. These often begin suddenly and develop quickly.

Influenza is much more than a cough and cold. It usually requires 2-4 days in bed. Full recovery can take up to 3-4 weeks.

How Does Influenza Spread?

Influenza is generally spread by the coughs and sneezes of an infected person. The infection starts in the upper airways – the nose and throat.

If the virus spreads further down into the lungs, this can result in bronchitis and pneumonia.

Treatment

Treatment of influenza is now possible using antiviral medications. Antiviral medications are available on prescription and can limit the effect of influenza if they are taken early after onset of symptoms (within 48 hours). If taken early, they can reduce both the severity and duration of influenza.

Who is at Risk?

While almost anyone can get influenza, there are a number of 'high risk' groups. People with asthma and other lung diseases are especially vulnerable. Viral infections can lead to increased asthma symptoms and other serious complications like pneumonia (infected lungs).

If you are over 60 and have a chronic (long-term) lung disease, your risk of being hospitalised with pneumonia is up to seven times higher than normal.

The best solution is to prevent influenza infections in people at risk.

How can Influenza be prevented?

Vaccination is the only effective way to prevent influenza. Doctors strongly recommend vaccination every year for adults and children with asthma.

The influenza vaccine is now available free to people considered to be at risk. This includes:

- People 65 years or over
- People of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background
- Pregnant women
- Adults and children 6 months or older with conditions predisposing to severe illness (this includes COPD and asthma)

Vaccination for People with Asthma

Influenza vaccination is recommended for all who want it. It is particularly recommended for

- adults and children 6 months or older with severe asthma
- pregnant women with asthma
- women with asthma who anticipate being pregnant through the winter. In this case, it is wise to be vaccinated before the pregnancy.

Note: People with proven egg allergy should not have the influenza vaccine as it occasionally causes a reaction. If you suspect you have egg allergy, consult your doctor.

The influenza vaccine takes about 14 days to provide its greatest protection. Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated in autumn, before the influenza season arrives.

What about Side Effects?

Many people believe that the influenza vaccine can cause flu-like symptoms. However, as the vaccine is made up of inactive (dead) virus pieces, it cannot cause influenza. You may have a sore arm after the injection, but that is all.

For Further Information

Speak to your GP or pharmacist