

# Influenza

## Immunisation Information



**The National Immunisation Program provides free influenza vaccine for all people aged 65 years and older, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged between 15 and 49 years with health risks and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and older.**

### Influenza

Influenza infection occurs every year in the community. Most cases of influenza occur within a 6 to 8 week period mostly in the winter to spring months. This is known as the 'influenza season'. Pandemics (involving a high proportion of people in a geographic region or continent) have occurred four times in the past 100 years.

Influenza is caused by a highly contagious virus, which is spread by coughs and sneezes. The person you catch it from may be well at the time and you can pass it on to others before realizing you are unwell.

Influenza affects people differently. Most people are ill for a few days but some are much sicker and need hospitalization. The usual symptoms are:

- Sudden onset;
- Fever;
- Muscle aches;
- Weakness;
- Headache;
- Sore throat and
- Cough.

### Influenza vaccine

Influenza viruses change frequently therefore the influenza vaccine is updated every year. An annual influenza vaccine is recommended in the months of March or April. Protection develops about 2 weeks after being given the injection and lasts up to a year. There are different brands of influenza vaccine but they all protect

against the same strains of influenza that are chosen each year. Influenza vaccines are an injection containing killed influenza virus components, salt water, trace amounts of an antibiotic and a preservative. They are cultivated in embryonic hens eggs. The preservative in some influenza vaccine is thiomersal, a mercury-containing compound.

### Who should receive the influenza vaccine?

Influenza vaccine is strongly recommended and is free for:

- Everyone aged 65 years or older;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged between 15 and 49 years with health risks;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over;
- Public hospital outpatients (in the hospital setting) and inpatients at high risk for complications of influenza.

Influenza vaccine is also strongly recommended for people over 6 months of age with:

- Chronic heart disorders;
- Diabetes and kidney disorders;
- Asthma and chronic respiratory disorders;
- Suppressed immune system due to illness or treatment;
- Live in a nursing home or hostel;
- Are a worker in a hospital, long term care facility or nursing home and
- Live or care for someone who has chronic illness or is aged.

Influenza immunisation is also recommended for:

- Severe asthmatics;
- Children on long term Aspirin therapy;
- Pregnant women;
- Workers and
- Travellers in groups.

Influenza vaccine should be administered to any person who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza.

Influenza can be given to children as young as six months of age. Children under 2 years of age with medical risk factors are at greater risk of severe influenza illness.

**Infants from 6 months and children under 9 years of age receiving influenza vaccine for the first time, require 2 doses at least 1 month apart.** Infants and children under 6 years old also receive a smaller dose of the vaccine.

### **Possible side effects of the influenza vaccine.**

Influenza vaccine cannot give you a dose of influenza because it contains no active virus. Some people who get influenza vaccine may still get the 'flu' but they will usually get a milder case than those who were not vaccinated.

#### **Common side effects:**

- Pain, redness and swelling at the injection site;
- Low grade temperature;
- Muscle aches;
- Drowsiness or tiredness and
- A temporary small lump at the injection site.

If mild reactions do occur, they may last 1 to 2 days. In children under 5 years of age these reactions may be more pronounced. The side effects can be reduced by:

- Placing a cold wet cloth on the sore injection site;
- Not overdressing;
- Taking paracetamol to lower fever and
- Having extra fluids to drink.

#### **Severe side effect:**

- An association has been shown with influenza vaccine and Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) with 1 to 2 cases of GBS occurring per million vaccinated. There has not been an excess number of cases of GBS notified in Australia in association with influenza vaccine. Patients with a history of GBS related in time to influenza vaccination may be at increased risk of developing GBS if given influenza vaccine. This would need further discussion with the doctor to weigh the risk and benefits.

#### **Extremely rare side effect:**

- Severe allergic reaction.

If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor or hospital.

### **Pre-immunisation Checklist**

Before you or your child are immunised, tell the doctor or nurse if any of the following apply:

- Unwell on the day of immunisation;
- Has had a severe reaction to any vaccine;
- Allergic to any component of the vaccine;
- Under 6 months of age;
- Has an anaphylactic allergy to eggs;
- Has a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome.

The Immunisation Program wishes to acknowledge [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) as a source of information.

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