

Can you afford to get the flu this winter?

The leaves are turning and there's a chill in the air – yes, it's that time of year again: flu season. And if you don't think you need to take precautions against catching flu, think again.

Because flu happens at the same time as other winter illnesses, many of us believe the flu is as harmless as the common cold, but it can actually be a very serious disease. In fact, people can take several weeks to fully recover from flu.¹ In Australia, flu leads to an estimated 1.5 million days off work, 300,000 GP consultations and 18,000 hospital admissions each year.^{2,3} And, while most people successfully recover, it is important to remember that flu is estimated to kill at least 1,500^{2,4} Australians each year. In one 10-year UK review, 18 percent of people who died from flu-related deaths were aged under 65.^{5,6}

People with certain at-risk medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, or certain respiratory diseases such as asthma or COPD, are vulnerable to developing flu-related complications.⁷ It is estimated that nearly 1 in 3 people aged 50-64 have an underlying at-risk condition,⁸ but some of these conditions are significantly under-diagnosed;⁹ because of this, it is even more important for those over 50 or with an at-risk condition to protect themselves from flu. A recent UK study of over 2 million cases found a doubling of the risk of both heart attack and stroke in the week following respiratory infection, highlighting the value of avoiding respiratory infections such as flu.¹⁰

“Many people think flu is just one of those things which goes part and parcel with winter, but it's not necessarily true,” said Professor Tom Kotsimbos, Respiratory Specialist and Head of Infection and Immunity Research at Alfred Hospital, Melbourne. “While there is no ‘magic bullet’ for flu, there are a few key actions everyone should consider in the lead-up to winter, chief among them being vaccination.”

Prof Kotsimbos went on to say that in 2008 all three strains included in the vaccine are new compared with last year, which means that there has been a significant change in the circulating flu virus strains, and people are not likely to have pre-existing immunity to the new strains.¹¹

“Even if you've been vaccinated before, the flu virus strains are always subtly changing which means that you may be vulnerable every year – and this is particularly the case in 2008 when all the strains in the vaccine are new,” said Prof Kotsimbos.

Because it provides 70-90% immunity against the flu in healthy adults, vaccination is the single most effective and practical way for people to protect themselves and those they care about against flu.⁷ Flu vaccination works by encouraging your immune system to recognise and quickly fight the virus by injecting small fragments of killed flu virus before the season hits. Studies have shown that being vaccinated reduces the incidence of flu-like-illness and workdays lost among people under 65; and reduces the cases of pneumonia, hospitalisation due to respiratory illness and total deaths during the influenza season among those aged 65 or over.^{12,13}

Tips to minimise the risk of catching the flu

- Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing
- Keep your hands away from your mouth and face
- See your doctor for an influenza vaccination

Additionally, being vaccinated also has the benefit of reducing the risk of spreading it to those around you who may be more vulnerable to flu than yourself – for example, grandparents or young children.

“Some people may not consider getting vaccinated because they think they can ‘ride out’ the flu season on the strength of their general health and aren’t too concerned about being incapacitated for a week or longer,” said Prof Kotsimbos. “However, they should also think about the consequences of infecting those around them, especially if they come into contact with people over 65, people with at-risk conditions, or young children. While you may be able to weather a case of the flu, those who you care about might have a harder time of it, and anything that can be done to limit that risk is strongly advisable.”

This autumn, take the time to seriously consider your life, your commitments, and your family. Ask yourself: can you afford to get the flu?

If you would like more information on influenza, speak with your doctor or visit www.flu.com.au

References

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