

Flu – important background information

People often confuse the common cold with the flu, otherwise known as influenza. However, “colds” are usually less severe and rarely cause serious illness.¹ Flu on the other hand, is a potentially debilitating viral illness which affects the whole body, with symptoms including fever, headaches, muscle aches and pains.¹ People can take several weeks to fully recover from flu;² while for a small percentage of the population it can lead to hospitalisation or even death.

Cold versus flu: key differences³

	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	Usual; high (37.7°C to 38.8°C; occasionally higher, especially in young children); lasts 3-4 days
Headache	Rare	Common
General aches, pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
Fatigue, weakness	Sometimes	Usual; can last up to 2-3 weeks
Extreme exhaustion	Never	Usual; at the beginning of the illness
Nasal congestion	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest discomfort, cough	Mild to moderate; hacking cough	Common; can become severe
Complications	Sinus congestion; middle ear infection; asthma	Bronchitis, pneumonia; can be life threatening
Prevention	Frequent hand-washing; avoid close contact with anyone who has a cold	Annual vaccination; frequent hand-washing; avoid close contact with anyone who has the flu

The flu virus is spread when infected people cough or sneeze into the air, transmitting droplets which are breathed in by other people. It can also be transmitted via objects (e.g. door handles) on which virus particles have settled.

A new vaccine is made every year to ensure the best possible protection. The vaccine protects people against three strains of influenza which the World Health Organization identifies as the most likely to cause outbreaks for that season. Australia’s 2008 flu vaccine includes three completely new strains (A/Solomon Islands-like, A/Brisbane-like and B/Florida-like)⁴ 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.

The impact on Australia

In Australia, significant levels of flu occur most years, with more severe outbreaks every two to three years. Each year in Australia, flu is estimated to result in over 300,000 GP consultations, 18,000 hospital admissions, and 1.5 million days off work.^{5,6} Approximately 1,500 Australian adults and children die from the consequences of flu every year.^{6,7}

Who’s at risk

Flu isn’t just a problem for the elderly – up to 18 per cent⁸ of all excess deaths attributable to flu are in people under 65 years of age. It also potentially has serious consequences for people with underlying medical conditions.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends flu vaccination for a number of groups, including:⁹

- People aged 65 or over (these people receive free flu vaccination as part of the Commonwealth Government's *Influenza Vaccine Program for Older Australians*);
- People with underlying chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes, respiratory disease, heart disease, kidney disease and those with a weakened immune system;
- Healthcare providers;
- Anyone else who wants to decrease the likelihood of becoming ill with flu.

Many healthy Australians can't afford to get flu, such as those who are self-employed, single parents, carers or people who can't afford to take any time off work.

Avoiding flu

Vaccination is the single most effective and practical way for people to protect themselves and those they care about against flu⁹

While the influenza vaccine is not 100% effective, it does protect the majority of those vaccinated against developing the infection and also moderates the severe consequences of infection.

In healthy adults, the vaccine provides between 70-90% protection against infection when there is a good match between the vaccine and circulating strains.¹⁰ Studies have shown it also significantly 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.^{11,12}

Australia has been very successful in vaccinating people 65 years and over against flu, with 79% of this age group becoming vaccinated in 2004.¹³ However, there is room for improvement among those aged under 65 with underlying medical conditions as they are also at increased risk of serious complications from flu – yet only 42% of this group were vaccinated in 2004.¹³

Unfortunately, many people who should be vaccinated avoid doing so, because they believe being fit and healthy will protect them against flu – **this is not necessarily the case**. Anyone exposed to the virus – young or old, healthy or weak – could become infected with flu and feel unwell for up to several weeks.^{2,14}

When to get vaccinated

For most regions of Australia flu vaccination is best carried out before May, when serious outbreaks can begin to occur. While it is possible to contract flu at any time of the year, the majority of people will become infected between July and September.

In the far north of Australia flu outbreaks can occur early in the year and vaccination should be practiced as early as possible.

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