

## Influenza

### Overview

Influenza, or the 'flu', strikes most people at least once - and one infection does not protect against future infections because the virus can change from one flu season to the next.

The flu strikes quickly with a high fever, a cough, headache, muscle aches and joint pain. The symptoms are more severe than a common cold and last a week or so. Other symptoms include a sore throat, runny nose, sneezing, and severe fatigue.

Complications such as pneumonia can happen in babies, older people and people with compromised immune systems or chronic health conditions. These groups should have an annual flu vaccination, except babies under 6 months, who can be protected by vaccinating the mother during pregnancy.

Winter and the cooler months on either side are the most common times for influenza, but tropical areas of Australia can have smaller outbreaks throughout the year.

### Causes

Influenza is one of the world's most contagious conditions. It is passed on when an infected person coughs or sneezes, releasing droplets containing the virus into the air. Anyone nearby who inhales infected droplets or touches a surface contaminated with droplets and then touches their mouth or nose could 'catch' the flu. The most contagious period is in the 24 hours before the symptoms start and the next few days.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), annual influenza epidemics result in about 3 to 5 million cases of severe illness, and about 250,000 to 500,000 deaths. It can spread very quickly through schools, child care facilities, workplaces, nursing homes and health care facilities.

There are 3 main types of influenza: A, B and C. Type A is the most severe and can also affect animals, hence the names 'swine flu' and 'bird flu'. Types B and C are milder and may be included in the annual influenza vaccine.

### Symptoms

On average, it takes between 24 and 48 hours to incubate the flu, and the first signs are usually:

- ▶ A sore throat.
- ▶ A high temperature with chills.
- ▶ A runny nose - like a cold, but more severe.
- ▶ Muscle aches and joint pain.
- ▶ Severe fatigue.
- ▶ Sneezing.
- ▶ Other symptoms may include:
  - ▶ Headache.
  - ▶ Sweating.
  - ▶ Dry cough, which may become wet with mucus (productive).
  - ▶ Irritability.
  - ▶ Loss of appetite.
  - ▶ Swollen glands.

### The severity of the symptoms will vary and you might have all of them or just a few.

The most common complication is pneumonia, which occurs when the virus attacks the lungs and/or the weakened lungs are attacked by bacteria.

### People who have a higher risk of infections include:

- ▶ Men and women aged 65 and over.
- ▶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over.
- ▶ People with heart disease, chronic lung disease, chronic neurological conditions, compromised immune systems (including patients with HIV and other autoimmune conditions), and other chronic conditions such as diabetes and kidney disease.
- ▶ People with moderate-to-severe asthma.
- ▶ People in nursing homes.
- ▶ Pregnant women, low birth weight babies and premature infants.

### Diagnosis

To diagnose your condition, the doctor will ask about symptoms and examine your ears, throat, glands and chest. A swab may be taken from the throat or nose to confirm the type of infection. A chest x-ray may be ordered if there is a suspicion of pneumonia.

### Treatment

The flu will resolve itself with bed rest, plenty of fluid and paracetamol to reduce pain, fever and chills.

Stay at home, to avoid infecting other people.

You should get as much rest as possible, especially while you have a high fever, as this gives the body a chance to put all its energy into recovering.

### To treat symptoms:

- ▶ Use paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen to treat fever, muscular aches, joint pains and headaches. Use aspirin or ibuprofen with care if you have asthma or stomach conditions such as an ulcer. Aspirin should never be used in children under the age of 16.
- ▶ Use saline nasal sprays and steam inhalation and/or decongestant sprays to reduce nasal congestion.
- ▶ Use cough suppressants only if absolutely necessary. Suppressing a cough is not always the best approach, as coughing is a natural response to remove mucous and reduce the risk of pneumonia.
- ▶ Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.
- ▶ Avoid exposure to dust, chemical fumes and cigarette smoke.

A viral infection cannot be treated with antibiotics. There are, however, two antiviral drugs: oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza). These are most effective when started within the first 48 hours. These may be recommended if the person has is very unwell or has an underlying chronic illness.

There are many herbal and non-pharmaceutical medicines that claim to relieve the symptoms of a cold or reduce the time and severity. Seek professional advice before using these treatments as they can have side effects and may also interact with other medicines.

Contact a doctor if you have difficulty breathing, chest pain, a severe headache or stiff neck, or you start coughing up green or yellow mucous.

### Lifestyle and Diet

The best treatment for influenza is prevention, and vaccination is the first line of defence. Not only can vaccination prevent onset of the virus, it can minimise symptoms and the length of time a person is sick. Vaccination is safe and easily administered.

**Experts recommended that people at high risk of complications of flu have the vaccine every year before flu season starts. These people include:**

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- ▶ Men and women aged 65 years and over.
- ▶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over.
- ▶ Children and adults with chronic cardiac condition such as congenital heart disease, coronary artery disease and congestive cardiac disease
- ▶ Children and adults with chronic respiratory conditions such as chronic lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and severe asthma.
- ▶ Children and adults with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, metabolic diseases, kidney disease, kidney failure, haemoglobinopathies and immunosuppression.
- ▶ People with immune deficiency such as HIV, malignancy and chronic steroid use.
- ▶ Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, including hospitals.
- ▶ People in contact with high-risk patients such as healthcare workers, nursing home staff, long-term care facilities staff, and household members of people in high-risk groups.
- ▶ Women who are planning a pregnancy and pregnant women who are in the third trimester of pregnancy during the influenza season.
- ▶ Ask your doctor whether you should have the vaccine and whether it is available for free.

### To reduce the spread of infection:

- ▶ Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- ▶ Avoid sharing cups and eating utensils.
- ▶ Wash your hands regularly, particularly when preparing food, eating or blowing the nose.
- ▶ Use disposable tissues rather than handkerchiefs. Throw them away after a single use.
- ▶ Avoid smoking or exposure to cigarette smoke.
- ▶ Eat a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and protein.
- ▶ Drink plenty of water.

### Support & Online Services

For additional resources and support visit:

- ▶ The World Health Organization  
[www.who.int](http://www.who.int)
- ▶ The Australian Lung Foundation [www.lungfoundation.com.au](http://www.lungfoundation.com.au)

[lungfoundation.com.au](http://lungfoundation.com.au)

- ▶ The Australian Department of Health and Ageing has information about influenza, including alerts and H1N1 information  
[www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au)

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