Influenza Fact Sheet

What is Influenza?

Influenza (flu) is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by the flu virus. It is usually a more severe illness than the 'common cold'.

What are the symptoms?

Flu symptoms often start suddenly with fever, dry cough and fatigue.

Other symptoms can include:

- Headache
- Muscle aches and pains
- Shivers
- Weakness
- Running nose
- Sore throat

Complications of the flu, such as pneumonia, can be life threatening – particularly for older people or those with a chronic illness.

Most people recover from flu in less than a week.

How is it spread?

The flu virus spreads easily when infected people cough or sneeze without covering their mouths and noses.

It can also be passed on through contact with contaminated surfaces.

The flu virus can live for up to five minutes on the hand and up to a day on hard surfaces. The flu virus enters the body through the nose or throat.

It then takes one to three days for the person to start feeling unwell.

People can pass on the virus from a day before symptoms start, and for up to seven days after symptoms start.

How is it diagnosed?

Flu is diagnosed when the virus is detected on a sample taken from the nose, throat or lower respiratory tract or from a blood test.

How is it treated?

- Rest and make sure you drink and eat enough.
- Paracetamol can help lower your fever and relieve your headache and muscle aches. Follow the instructions carefully on how much to take.
- Severe or worsening flu symptoms should be assessed by a doctor. Sometimes people require admission to hospital for further treatment, such as with antiviral medications.

How is it prevented?

There are a number of ways to reduce your chance of catching flu.

- Get the flu vaccine every year to protect yourself from the seasonal flu viruses. This will also help protect your family, friends and colleagues.
- Wash your hands often to get rid of the germs you may have picked up. Use soap and water, or an alcohol based hand rub.
If you get sick – don’t share it!

- When you cough or sneeze cover your mouth with your elbow (rather than your hand).
- Stay home from work. If your child is unwell, keep them home from childcare or school. Avoid visiting people who are likely to get really unwell from flu, including infants and young children, pregnant women, those with a chronic illness, and the elderly.
- Stay at least one metre away from other people, especially if you are coughing.
- Call ahead if you need to see a doctor. This will allow the medical service to plan your visit to prevent the infection spreading to others.

Who should get immunised?

You need flu vaccine every year to stay protected.

The best time to be vaccinated is in autumn, before the winter flu season starts.

Some people are at a greater risk of getting severe flu and complications.

The following people are eligible for a free vaccine:

- All adults aged 65 years and over.
- Pregnant women at any stage in their pregnancy.
- Adults and children from six months of age with chronic medical conditions, such as heart, lung, liver or kidney diseases, asthma, diabetes, cancer, impaired immunity or neuromuscular conditions.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged six months to five years of age and 15 years and over.

Free vaccine is available for these people through General Practitioners and other immunisation providers. A small consultation fee may apply.

People who come into contact with those at risk of severe flu should also be vaccinated.

This includes healthcare workers, child care workers, and other people who live or work with vulnerable people.

Are there any side effects associated with the flu vaccine?

Common side effects of flu vaccination include pain and swelling at the injection site. Fever is less common. These side effects are usually mild and resolve quickly without any treatment.

The seasonal flu vaccine cannot give you the flu.

If you have any concerns or queries about the flu vaccine, please discuss with your General Practitioner.

For more information

Call the Public Health Hotline – Tasmania on 1800 671 738 to speak to a Clinical Nurse Consultant.

6/09/2016