

Influenza

Influenza (often called flu) is a respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus. There are 3 types; A, B and C.

Influenza A and B cause most of the disease in humans, and type A has two commonly occurring subtypes; H1 and H3. Influenza viruses are characterised by the way they mutate from year to year. When a virus mutates it forms a new strain to which a person may not have immunity from past infection or past immunisation. Because of this, any influenza vaccinations must be annual to provide adequate protection against the currently circulating influenza strains.

How it is spread

Influenza is spread from person to person through respiratory droplets produced by coughing and sneezing. It may also be spread by people touching surfaces contaminated by the droplets, and then touching their mouths or eyes, allowing the virus to enter their bodies. The time between infection and the appearance of symptoms is short, usually 1 to 3 days.

Symptoms

Influenza illness is characterised by the often abrupt onset of one or more of the following symptoms; tiredness, fever, headache, chills, sore throat, loss of appetite and muscle aches. There may be an associated cough, nasal discharge and sneezing.

How serious is influenza?

The severity of influenza depends on the strain, the patient's age, previous exposure to the infective strain, the presence of other medical conditions, and their vaccination status. Those at increased risk for severe disease or dying from influenza are eligible for free annual vaccination; the recommended groups are listed here.

Infectious period

The ability to transmit the virus is higher when cough and fever are present. People are considered no longer infectious if 24 hours have passed since their fever has ended, as long as:

- they have received 3 days of anti-viral medication OR
- 5 days have passed since the start of their flu symptoms (children may remain infectious for longer e.g. 10 days)

Immunosuppressed people may shed the virus and be infectious for weeks.

Treatment

Treatment for influenza includes rest, increased fluids and pain relief. Anti-viral treatment can shorten the duration of both symptoms and infectiousness, particularly if commenced within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms. It may also reduce illness severity in those hospitalised with influenza. Anti-viral treatment is recommended for those at high risk of severe disease and those who have contact with high-risk individuals. People who are hospitalised with influenza are also recommended to have anti-viral treatment, regardless of symptom duration.

Prevention

Annual vaccination is recommended for everyone aged 6 months and older. The influenza vaccine is a safe and effective vaccine. It does not contain any live virus, so a person cannot develop influenza from having the vaccine. Vaccination reduces the risk of infection with the influenza virus, and also reduces the severity of illness if infection still occurs. This also means that someone who is vaccinated is less likely to develop and pass on influenza to someone who is at higher risk for severe illness.

The influenza vaccination can be given at the same time, or any time before or after, any of the COVID-19 vaccines. Read more about the flu vaccination [here](#).

To stop the spread of disease, people should cough into their upper arm or cover their mouths when coughing. Regular hand-washing and disposing of tissues into the bin immediately, even when not coughing, may also help to prevent influenza. People with symptoms of the flu should physically distance from otherwise where possible, should not attend childcare, school or work, and should wear a surgical mask in the public setting, particularly within their infectious period.

Contact

For more information contact your nearest [Centre for Disease Control](#).

| Location | Phone |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Darwin (Top End Region) | (08) 8922 8044 or 1800 008 002 |
| Katherine (Big Rivers Region) | (08) 8973 9049 |
| Tennant Creek (Central Australia Region) | (08) 8962 4259 |
| Alice Springs (Central Australia Region) | (08) 8951 7540 |
| Nhulunbuy (East Arnhem Region) | (08) 8987 0357 |

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| PGC ID: HEALTHINTRA-1627664142-59631 | | TRM ID: EDOC2022/434121 | |
| Version: Version: 4.0 DO NOT EDIT THIS | Approved Date: 3/12/2023 | Review Date: 3/12/2028 | |