

# Influenza (The Flu)

Influenza or 'the flu' is a highly contagious disease caused by infection from influenza type A or B (or rarely C) virus. These viruses infect the upper airways and lungs.

The flu can occur all year round but in temperate areas the influenza season typically occurs during the winter months.

Flu is not the same as a common cold, and can be a serious illness. For some people, such as the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions, the flu can cause serious complications which require hospitalisation. It can sometimes lead to death.

Flu is usually spread through infected people coughing and sneezing, which temporarily contaminates the surrounding air and surfaces with infected droplets. You can reduce the risk of infection by getting vaccinated and practising good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Occasionally there have been worldwide outbreaks of flu, known as flu pandemics, which have occurred with the global spread of a new type of flu virus.

## Signs and Symptoms:

Symptoms usually appear 1 to 3 days after being infected.

The symptoms of flu can include:

- fever
- dry cough
- muscle and joint pain
- tiredness or extreme exhaustion
- headache
- sore throat.
- nasal congestion

In the elderly, fever may be absent and the only signs of flu may be:

- confusion
- shortness of breath
- worsening of a chronic condition

Children are more likely to have gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea).

## Treatment:

Generally, flu is managed by:

- resting in bed
- drinking plenty of fluids (particularly water)
- taking over-the-counter medication to help relieve symptoms (take as directed in the product information).

Prescription antiviral medications can reduce the length of time symptoms last and help you return to your daily routines earlier. These medications are most effective if they are started within 48 hours of flu symptoms appearing.

See your doctor or [call 13 HEALTH \(13 43 25 84\)](https://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html) (<https://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html>) if you:

- are concerned about your symptoms
- are in a high-risk group have a cough and high fever (38 degrees Celsius or more) that is not improving

### **Transmission:**

The flu can spread from person to person by:

- droplets spread from an infected person's coughs or sneezes (these droplets generally travel less than 1 metre)
- touching surfaces contaminated by infected droplets (including hands, phones, keyboards and door handles) and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes.

People with flu can be infectious to others from 24 hours before symptoms start until a week after the start of symptoms. Even people with mild flu illness can transmit the infection.

### **Prevention:**

You can reduce the risk of infection by getting vaccinated and practising good hand and respiratory hygiene to protect yourself and others:

- stay home when you are sick
- wash your hands regularly with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub
- wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
- use a tissue, or the inside of your arm, when you cough and sneeze
- throw tissues away immediately and wash hands
- don't share items such as cigarettes, cups, lipstick, toys, or anything which has come into contact with the mouth or nose
- stay at least 1 metre away from people who have flu-like symptoms
- clean frequently touched surfaces regularly, such as door handles, taps, tables, benches, and fridge doors (flu viruses can be removed using household detergent)

### **Vaccination**

Vaccination is the best way to reduce the risk of getting flu. Being vaccinated gives you protection against flu by building immunity to the virus and preventing transmission of the virus to other people.

Vaccination is required annually, as immunity from the vaccine decreases over time and the vaccine can change each year to cover the current virus strains. Vaccination usually takes up to 2 weeks to be effective.

The flu season usually peaks in most of Queensland in July/August.

**Vaccination is recommended for anyone aged 6 months and older who wishes to protect themselves from influenza and its complications.**

Free vaccine is available for those individuals at greatest risk of severe flu. They are:

- pregnant women during any trimester
- adults aged over 65 years old
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years old and over
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 6 months to 5 years old
- individuals over 6 months old with medical conditions predisposing them to severe flu.

Where to get vaccinated:

- Your doctor or local immunisation provider
- Community pharmacies may offer a flu vaccination service
- Some local councils run immunisation clinics

- Some employers may offer free flu vaccinations for their staff.

The vaccine does not contain live flu viruses and cannot cause flu. However, some people may experience mild flu-like symptoms for up to 48 hours as their immune system responds to the vaccine. Serious reactions to immunisation are rare. While some people may experience mild side effects such as pain, swelling, and redness at the injection site, these usually resolve quickly.

Immediate allergic reactions to flu vaccine are rare. People who are allergic to eggs are no longer excluded from flu vaccinations and should discuss their egg allergy and vaccination with their doctor.

If you experience any symptoms that concern you, [call 13 HEALTH](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html) (<https://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html>), your doctor, or the immunisation provider.

## 2017 seasonal flu vaccine

World Health Organization (WHO) influenza experts select the influenza strains for the southern hemisphere season each year. Their selection is usually accurate but it is never entirely possible to know what strains will circulate until well into the season.

The [influenza vaccine is updated each year](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/news-alerts/news/flu-vaccine) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/news-alerts/news/flu-vaccine>) to reflect virus strains circulating around the world in the last 12 months.

In 2017, only the four strain, or quadrivalent influenza vaccine (QIV) is available in Australia.

The virus strains included in the 2017 vaccines are:

- A (H1N1): an A/Michigan/45/2015 (H1N1)pdm09 like virus (New strain differs from strain in 2016 vaccine)
- A (H3N2): an A/Hong Kong/4801/2014 (H3N2) like virus
- B: a B/Brisbane/60/2008 like virus
- B: a B/Phuket/3073/2013 like virus.

### Health outcome:

Most people recover from the flu within a week, although a cough and tiredness may persist.

Serious complications of flu occur in a small proportion of people who are infected and include pneumonia, inflammation of the heart muscle and neurologic complications, which can lead to hospitalisation and death. People at highest risk of complications from flu include those with pre-existing medical conditions. However, previously healthy people can also have severe complications.

For young children and the elderly, flu is one of the most common vaccine preventable causes of hospitalisation.

### Other resources:

[Immunise Australia Program - Influenza](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/immunise-influenza)  
(<http://www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/immunise-influenza>)

### Help and assistance:

For more information:

- see your local doctor
- contact the nearest [public health unit](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/contact-us/contact/public-health-units/default.asp) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/contact-us/contact/public-health-units/default.asp>)
- [call 13 HEALTH \(13 43 25 84\)](http://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html) (<http://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health/index.html>) to get qualified health advice 24/7 for the cost of a local call.

If you are in an emergency situation, call 000

**Health Insite:**

[Influenza A \(flu\)](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/influenza-a-flu) (<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/influenza-a-flu>)