

Influenza (The Flu)

Influenza (or the flu) is a highly contagious, acute viral infection that spreads easily from person to person. Influenza is most often caused by type A or B influenza viruses that infect the upper airways and lungs.

In temperate regions influenza usually occurs seasonally. Most cases in Australia occur during the winter months between June and September. However, in tropical and subtropical areas, seasonal influenza can occur all year round.

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

Signs and Symptoms:

Symptoms usually appear 1 to 3 days after becoming infected.

The symptoms of flu can include:

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

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

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

Symptoms	Flu	Cold
Runny nose or nasal congestion	Rare	Common
Sneezing	Rare	Common
Sore throat	Common	Common
Fever	Common Temperatures between 38 °C and 40 °C Sudden onset	Rare
Cough	Common Sudden onset	Common Mild or moderate
Headache	Common Sometimes intense	Rare
Aches and pains	Common Sometimes intense	Rare Mild
Fatigue	Common Intense Duration: A few days, sometimes longer	Common Mild
Nausea and vomiting	Common in children Rare in adults Often accompanied by diarrhoea and abdominal pain in children	Rare Mild

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 and have a cough and or high fever (38 degrees Celsius or more) that is not improving

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.

Transmission:

Flu can spread from person to person by:

- droplets spreading from an infected person when they cough, sneeze or talk
- touching surfaces contaminated by infected droplets (including hands, remote controls, 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. Children and those who have compromised immune systems can be infectious for longer. Even people with mild flu illness can transmit the infection.

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.

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 (in general, you can be infectious for up to a week after the onset of symptoms)
- 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 your 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 mobile phones, keyboards, remote controls, door handles, taps, tables, benches, gym equipment 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 occurs annually in the southern and central areas of the state between May and October, with a peak in August/September. In the tropical areas the pattern can be more variable and may include clusters outside this period.

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:

- all children aged 6 months to less than 5 years of age
- pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy
- persons 65 years of age or older
- all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 6 months and over
- individuals aged 6 months and over with medical conditions which increase the risk of influenza disease complications.

All other Queenslanders can purchase the vaccine from their doctor or immunisation provider.

Where to get vaccinated:

- your doctor or local immunisation provider
- community pharmacies may offer a flu vaccination service for adults
- some local councils may 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 the vaccine 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](https://www.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.

2019 seasonal flu vaccine

The 2019 seasonal vaccines for the southern hemisphere include the following strains:

- A (H1N1): an A/Michigan/45/2015 (H1N1)pdm09 like virus;
- A (H3N2): an A/Switzerland/8060/2017 (H3N2) like virus
- B: a B/Phuket/3073/2013 like virus
- B: a B/Colorado/06/2017 like virus (not included in the TIVs)

In 2019, the funded vaccines available include:

Quadrivalent influenza vaccines for:

- all children from 6 months to less than 5 years of age
- pregnant women (at any stage of pregnancy)
- all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 6 months and over
- all individuals aged 6 months and over with medical conditions predisposing them to severe influenza
- individuals up to 65 years.

Trivalent influenza vaccines (TIV)s are recommended for:

- adults aged 65 years and over

The higher immunogenicity trivalent flu vaccine is the best form of protection against flu for older Queenslanders.

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Other resources:

[Immunisation service - Influenza](https://beta.health.gov.au/services/flu-influenza-immunisation-service) (<https://beta.health.gov.au/services/flu-influenza-immunisation-service>)

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>)

URL: <http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/8/118/82/influenza-the-flu>

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