

# 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
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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 during any trimester
- adults aged over 65 years old
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years old and over.
- ALL individuals from 6 months and older with increased risk of complications from influenza (talk to your doctor or immunisation provider to see if you are eligible for a free flu vaccination).

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](http://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.

## 2018 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>) (<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 2018, the four strain, or quadrivalent influenza vaccine (QIV) will be available for children aged 6 months to less than 5 years and all other “medically at risk” children and adults up to 65 years of age. The 65 years and older age group will be able to access high dose trivalent influenza vaccine in Australia.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations for the composition of the *trivalent* influenza vaccine for the southern hemisphere winter 2018 influenza season are:

- A (H1N1): an A/Michigan/45/2015 (H1N1)pdm09 like virus;
- A/Singapore/INFIMH-16-0019/2016 (H3N2)-like virus; and
- B: a B/Phuket/3073/2013-like virus (Yamagata lineage)

*Quadrivalent* influenza vaccines containing two influenza B viruses, should include the above three viruses and a B/Brisbane/60/2008 like virus (Victoria lineage).

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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>)