



# Influenza immunisation

## What you need to know

### Information for the public

#### What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza, commonly known as flu, is a contagious disease caused by the influenza virus. It is easily spread by coughing or sneezing, or by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your mouth or nose.

Symptoms of flu may include:

- fever
- sore throat
- chills
- tiredness
- cough
- headache
- muscle/body aches
- vomiting.

#### How serious is the flu?

Flu is much more severe in pregnant women, infants, the elderly, and people with certain health conditions such as heart, lung or kidney disease or a weakened immune system. However, even healthy people can get the flu and experience severe illness. Flu can cause high fever and pneumonia, and make existing medical conditions worse.

In 2015, approximately 1000 people in WA were hospitalised due to complications from the flu. Eight per cent of those were children less than five years old. Forty per cent of the elderly who were diagnosed with the flu were hospitalised.

#### What is influenza (flu) vaccine?

All the brands of flu vaccine available in the 2016 program in Western Australia use parts of the killed virus to create an immune response which can protect you from becoming sick if you become exposed to live influenza viruses. The flu vaccine contains only killed virus particles – not living viruses – so immunisation cannot cause flu.

Influenza viruses are always changing. Each year, scientists try to match the strains of influenza viruses in the vaccine to those most likely to cause flu illnesses that year. It takes up to two weeks for protection to develop after immunisation and protection will last about a year. This is why it is important that you have the flu vaccine every year.

This year's flu vaccine provides protection against four strains of influenza, including H3N2, the strain found circulating in the northern hemisphere this season.

## Who should receive the flu vaccine?

Under the National Immunisation Program the following people are eligible to receive free flu vaccine:

- all children aged from six months to younger than five years
- all pregnant women
- all persons aged 65 years of age or older
- all Aboriginal Australians aged 15 years and older
- all individuals with medical conditions that can predispose them to severe disease if they become infected with influenza, namely:
  - cardiac disease
  - chronic respiratory conditions
  - chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow-up or hospitalisation in the preceding year
  - chronic neurological conditions
  - people with impaired immunity
  - children aged six months to 10 years receiving long term aspirin therapy.

Flu immunisation is also available at a fee to the general public through GPs, Aboriginal Health Services and community immunisation providers.

## Some people should not have flu vaccine

Tell your healthcare provider if you have ever had a severe allergy resulting in a swelling of the lips or tongue, acute respiratory distress, or collapse (anaphylactic response) from the flu vaccine. You should also tell your healthcare provider if you have ever had Guillain-Barre syndrome (a severe illness causing muscle weakness). Your doctor will help you decide whether the vaccine is recommended for you.

People with egg allergy can safely be vaccinated with influenza vaccine because any residual egg in the vaccine is not sufficient to trigger any allergic response.

People who are unwell should usually wait until they recover before getting the flu vaccine. Talk to your doctor or nurse about whether to reschedule the immunisation.

## What are the risks from the flu vaccine?

Any medicine, including a vaccine, has potential serious side effects such as a severe allergic reaction. However, the risk of the flu vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small.

**Common, mild reactions** can occur after receiving the flu vaccine. These may include low-grade fever, aches and soreness, or redness or swelling where the vaccine was given. If these problems occur, they usually begin soon after the vaccine was given, last one to two days, and resolve without specific treatment.

**Serious reactions** such as severe allergic reactions to the flu vaccine can occur, but are very rare. People experiencing an extreme reaction should call an ambulance and see a doctor immediately.

## What if I have a reaction after flu immunisation?

Call an ambulance or go to a hospital emergency department immediately if you have signs of a severe allergic reaction, such as:

- difficulty breathing
- hoarse voice or wheezing
- paleness
- coughing
- hives
- losing consciousness.

If you develop a fever higher than 38.5 °C following immunisation take paracetamol (not aspirin) as directed on the package (depending on your weight/age), take extra fluids and dress lightly.

You should also consult your doctor if you experience any other unusual symptoms after immunisation, such as fever, convulsion and behaviour changes.

Although convulsion after immunisation is an uncommon event, you need to be aware of this possibility and should monitor your child for fever. Paracetamol can be used to reduce fever.

Tell your doctor what happened, the date and time it happened, and when the immunisation was given. If your doctor is not available, call Healthdirect Australia (1800 022 222, 24 hours a day) where a registered nurse will provide free advice about health issues and what to do next.

Vaccine safety is continually monitored. If you have symptoms you think may be a reaction to a vaccine, tell the doctor or nurse who gave the vaccination. You may also report the reaction yourself to the Western Australian Vaccine Safety Surveillance (WAVSS) system at [www.wavss.health.wa.gov.au](http://www.wavss.health.wa.gov.au) or by calling the Central Immunisation Clinic on 9321 1312, Monday to Friday (8.30am – 4.30pm).

## Information for parents

### Why should I consider having my child immunised against the flu?

Anyone can get the flu, but rates of infection and hospitalisation are highest among young children.

**Experience from Australia and overseas indicates that the majority of childhood flu-related hospitalisations and deaths occur among children without underlying medical conditions.**

Annual flu immunisation is strongly recommended for anyone six months of age or older with a medical condition that places them at higher risk of severe illness from flu. Children and adults with heart, lung or kidney disease or a weakened immune system are eligible for a free flu vaccine through the National Immunisation Program.

Children without underlying medical conditions who become infected with flu can also develop serious illnesses, including convulsions and diarrhoea.



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