

Flu vaccinations: frequently asked questions

Book your workplace flu vaccination program:

- 📞 1300 888 746
- ✉ corp.health@healthcareaustralia.com.au
- 🖱 flu.healthcareaustralia.com.au

What are immunisations?

Immunisations are a safe and effective way of protecting you from diseases such as influenza. The flu vaccine contains inactive particles of the virus that stimulate your body's own immune response without causing you to actually contract the virus itself. This immune response strengthens and protects you from becoming ill and helps your immune system to recognise and fight against these germs if you are exposed to the influenza virus.

What is influenza (the flu)?



- A highly infectious viral illness.
- Caused by the influenza virus.
- Tends to be much more severe than the common cold.
- Symptoms include: rapid onset of fever, muscle aches, joint pains, headache, sore throat.
- Cough and a generalised feeling of unwellness.
- Lasts up to 10 days.
- Can be followed by a secondary illness e.g. pneumonia.
- Peak time is winter.
- Majority of cases can be prevented by immunization.

Most people think that when they have a runny nose or a sore throat that they have the "flu" but usually, this is not the case. They usually have a common cold, which is a short-term, mild illness that, although inconvenient, rarely causes significant debility. The "cold" is caused by a range of viruses, which are different to the influenza virus. The sufferer of influenza is often so unwell that they are confined to bed. It can last up to 10 days and can be complicated by a range of secondary problems, including pneumonia and even death in high-risk individuals e.g. the elderly or those with chronic illnesses.

A flu outbreak occurs most years, but every 10 years or so, a major epidemic occurs in which larger numbers of the population are infected.

Can I get the flu from the vaccination?

No. The vaccine contains only inactivated virus particles (a virus that has been concentrated, killed then broken apart) and is therefore incapable of causing influenza infection.

How effective is the influenza vaccine?

Influenza vaccination prevents up to 90% of cases of Influenza infection in healthy adults.

Who should be vaccinated?

- Those who wish to reduce their likelihood of becoming ill with influenza.
- Women who are pregnant or breast feeding (including the first trimester).
- Those over 65 years of age and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults 50 years and older.
- Those with chronic, debilitating diseases (especially chronic heart, lung, kidney and metabolic disorders, eg diabetes).
- Those receiving immune suppressive therapy.
- Those who can transmit influenza to persons at risk.

Who should not be given the vaccine?

Being a highly purified, inactivated vaccine, there are a few considerations you need to think about before having an influenza vaccination:

- Anyone with a known allergy to the antibiotics: gentamicin, neomycin or polymyxin.
- Anyone with a known allergy to other components of the vaccine: polysorbate 80, octoxinol 9 lips or develop respiration distress or collapse when exposed to the above).
- Anyone with a severe allergy to eggs or chicken feathers (people who develop swelling the tongue, disorders, eg diabetes).
- Anyone with a present high fever.
- After you have your influenza vaccine, your usual dose of some medicines may be affected.

These medicines include:

- Carbamazepine e.g. Tegretol (used in epilepsy or convulsions).
- Phenobarbitone (used in epilepsy, or convulsions, anxiety, insomnia).
- Phenytoin e.g. Dilantin (used in epilepsy or convulsions).
- Theophylline (used for asthma).
- Warfarin (used to prevent blood clots).

If you are on any of these medicines, please consult your own doctor as soon as possible to see if they wish to organise a blood test within a few days of your vaccination to check your levels of medication.

How often is flu vaccination required?

Once a year.

How long does it take for me to be protected and how long does my protection last?

You will form antibodies to fight the flu around 3 –14 days after receiving your immunisation. Your antibodies will peak at around 4 – 6 weeks – this is when you are most protected. Your antibodies will gradually decline but you will remain protected for around 9 months to 1 year.

Why do I need to be vaccinated every year?

The influenza virus strains change each year so the vaccine is changed accordingly. The World Health Organisation predicts the 4 most expected strains and the vaccine manufacturers are all required to formulate their vaccines to cover these 4 strains.

What strains does the 2020 vaccine protect me against?

The 2020 vaccine protects against the 4 mostly likely flu strains to circulate in the southern hemisphere:

- A/Brisbane/02/2018 (H1N1) pdm09-like virus.
- A/South Australia/34/2019 (H3N2)-like virus.
- TB/Washington/02/2019-like (B/Victoria lineage) virus.
- Phuket/3073/2013-like (B/Yamagata lineage) virus.

If I am travelling overseas should I get this vaccination before I go?

Yes. Anyone travelling overseas should get vaccinated. You should ideally try to be vaccinated no later than 2 days before you are due to travel, in case you have any side-effects that require advice or treatment.

I am under 16. Can I still have the vaccination?

Following common law guidelines, if you are 16 years or over you can consent to have the vaccination without your parents' or guardians' consent. If you are 15 years or under (and are legally employed by the organisation paying for the vaccination) you may have the vaccination provided your parent or guardian sign your consent form. If you are not an employee or contractor of the organisation, unfortunately we cannot vaccinate you.

I have a cold or have already had the flu this year. Can I still have a flu vaccination?

Usually we only delay the vaccination if your temperature is high e.g. over 38.5 degrees Celsius. With a temperature this high, you would usually be too unwell to be at work and would feel quite hot. If you have a mild cold or have had it for more than 2 days, you probably do not have a high temperature and can have the vaccination. Even if you have already had the flu this year, you will still benefit from the vaccine as it will protect you against three other flu strains.

I am on antibiotics. Can I still get vaccinated?

Yes. The vaccine does not interact with any antibiotics so it is safe to have the vaccine while you are taking antibiotics.

I am allergic to penicillin. Can I still have a flu vaccination?

Yes. The vaccine does not contain any penicillin so it is safe to have the vaccine even if you are allergic to penicillin.

When should vaccination be carried out?

Vaccination is best carried out during April – June each year, before the onset of the peak season for flu (July – September and even October – November).

What are the possible side-effects?

Possible redness, soreness, itching, bruising or mild swelling at the injection site. This usually clears within 1 – 2 days. Sometimes, a tender lump under the arm appears (a lymph gland) that may be present for several days. Occasionally, people develop a mild fever within 1 – 2 days of the vaccination and occasionally muscle aches, headache or a general feeling of being unwell. These side-effects should never last longer than 1 – 2 days.

There have been inconclusive reports of serious neurological disorders in people who have previously suffered from the severe nervous system disorder Guillain-Barré syndrome. Those who have had Guillain-Barré syndrome should contact us so we can provide you with extra advice.

Does it reduce my natural immunity?

No. Vaccination does not reduce your natural immunity to infections – it acts as a “booster” to the immune system.

What if I am pregnant or am breastfeeding?

The medical profession and governments world-wide have identified pregnant women as a high priority group for receiving an influenza vaccination. This is based on:

- Good evidence that the vaccine is safe for both the pregnant woman and the unborn child.
- Good evidence to show that the vaccine reduces the risk of illness and hospitalisation due to influenza and pneumonia in vaccinated pregnant women.
- The process of vaccinating pregnant women extends protection against influenza and pneumonia to the unborn/newborn child which continues until the child is 6 months of age.
- Evidence that it reduces the incidence of stillbirth and premature birth. The vaccine may be administered during all stages of pregnancy, including the first trimester.

The vaccine is safe to be given during all stages of breast feeding. If you are concerned, talk to your obstetrician or doctor.

What else can I do to avoid getting the flu or a cold this winter?

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and dispose of the tissue in a rubbish bin after you use it.
- Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly, especially after you cough or sneeze.
- Don't share eating and drinking utensils or share food and drinks.
- Regularly clean surfaces such as desks, taps and fridge doors as flu viruses can live on these kinds of surfaces for a number of hours.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth as germs are commonly spread this way.
- Boost your immune system with a balanced diet, exercise and rest and try to reduce stress.

If you have any concerns or questions, please talk to your doctor.