



Delivering a Healthy WA

What is influenza?

Influenza or “the flu” is a common, highly infectious respiratory viral disease. In the majority of cases, the onset is sudden with typical symptoms. The virus is spread from person to person by airborne droplets of exhaled respiratory secretions, especially by coughing or sneezing. Typical symptoms include sudden onset of fever, sore throat, runny nose, cough, fatigue, headache, and aches and pains. Epidemics of influenza usually occur every year during winter, infecting about 10% of the population.

What is the difference between influenza and a “cold”?

Unlike Influenza, the common cold is an illness in which symptoms progress over several days. That is, from sniffles and sneezes, stuffy nose, discharge from the nose to a sore throat and irritating cough. Younger children commonly experience many colds per year which after progress to upper respiratory tract infections.

Most colds are caused by a variety of viruses and include Rhinoviruses, coronaviruses, adenoviruses, parainfluenzavirus, respiratory syncytical viruses, and in most cases will clear after a few days.

How serious is influenza?

Influenza is serious for very old or very young people, or people of any age who have a higher risk of complications (e.g. pneumonia, heart failure) due to certain chronic medical conditions, e.g. heart, lung, kidney, liver, immune, or metabolic (especially diabetes) diseases. Most healthy children and adults only have minor symptoms, or “colds”. More than 90% of the estimated 200 deaths caused by influenza each year in WA occur in people over 60 years of age.

Is there a vaccine?

Yes. Each year, a new vaccine containing the 3 most common strains of circulating influenza viruses is produced. In older people, influenza vaccine is about 30-40% effective against symptoms of influenza, 50-60% effective against hospitalisation due to influenza, and 70-80% effective against death from complications of influenza. In addition to reducing the risk of pneumonia, influenza vaccination appears to reduce the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

Who should be vaccinated?

Annual influenza vaccination is recommended by the National Health and Medical Research Council for everyone 65 years of age or older, for indigenous people 50 years of age or older (due to their higher risk of complications), for people from 6 months to 64 years of age with a higher risk of complications (e.g. people with chronic heart, lung, kidney, liver, immune, or metabolic [especially diabetes] diseases, and for household (family) contacts of people with a higher risk of complications. Parents of children less than 2 years of age with a higher risk of complications should vaccinate their whole family against influenza to reduce their risk of infection. Influenza vaccine is also recommended for pregnant women who will be in their second or third trimester during the influenza “season”, which is usually from May to October in WA.



Where is the vaccine available?

Your GP or health care provider will be able to give you the vaccine, which is usually available from February. The Australian Government funds "free" influenza vaccine for people 65 years of age or older, for indigenous people 50 years of age or older, and for indigenous people from 15 to 49 years of age with a higher risk condition. People from 6 months to 64 years of age who are not eligible for "free" influenza vaccine can purchase the vaccine from their GP or pharmacist (with a doctor's prescription). There may be a consultation fee if you are vaccinated by your GP.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes. The most common side effects of influenza vaccination are soreness and redness at the site of injection. These symptoms generally last 1 to 2 days and are reported in 20% of vaccinees. "Flu-like" symptoms, such as fever, fatigue and muscle soreness are reported in less than 1% of vaccinees. These symptoms usually occur within 6-12 hours of vaccination and last 1 to 2 days.

Immediate allergic reactions occur rarely after influenza vaccination. These reactions are probably the result of an allergic reaction to egg protein which is present in the vaccine. It is safe for pregnant women to have influenza vaccine at any time from the beginning of their pregnancy.

Why do some people get "flu-like" symptoms after influenza vaccination?

The vaccine contains particles of killed viruses, so it cannot cause influenza. Most people who develop a "flu-like" illness after their vaccination have probably been infected with one of the other "cold" viruses, which the vaccine does not provide any immunity against.

Who should not be vaccinated against influenza?

Influenza vaccination should be postponed if you have an acute illness, especially with a fever. People who have a severe allergy to eggs should not be given the influenza vaccine. This includes people who have developed hives, or swelling of the lips or tongue, or experienced asthma or collapse after eating eggs. Your doctor will be able to advise you whether you should receive the vaccine.

More information

For more information about influenza vaccination, contact your GP, the Central Immunisation Clinic on 9321 1312, your Local Government Authority or www.immunise.health.gov.au

July 2007