

## **INFLUENZA VACCINE**

### **What is the influenza (the flu)?**

Influenza is a contagious disease caused by infection with influenza viruses. It mainly affects the throat and lungs but it can also cause problems with the heart and other parts of the body, especially in young children and adults with health problems. In 2019 in Australia, there were over 310,000 cases of laboratory confirmed influenza, of which Victoria had 68,176 cases. Around 3000 deaths were attributable to influenza disease.

### **Influenza Symptoms:**

Symptoms usually occur one to three days after infection and can include fever, cough, sore throat, muscle and joint aches, headaches, runny or stuffy nose and severe fatigue. Children and the elderly can experience nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhoea. Compared with many other viruses such as the common cold, influenza tends to cause more severe symptoms and can be associated with life-threatening complications such as pneumonia, heart failure or stroke. It can also worsen other conditions people are living with.

### **How is influenza spread?**

The influenza virus is easily spread by coughing, sneezing and by contact with contaminated hands and surfaces. Infected people are contagious from about one day before symptoms start until three to five days after.

### **How is influenza diagnosed?**

Your health care provider may diagnose an influenza-like-illness by examination and symptoms. The specific diagnosis of influenza can only be confirmed by testing a sample of fluid from the back of your nose and throat.

### **Who is at risk of influenza?**

Anyone can get influenza. Those most likely to develop complications from influenza include children, pregnant women, the elderly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with other health conditions such as heart disease, lung disease, diabetes and other metabolic disorders, renal disease, neurological conditions and those with lowered immunity.

### **How can influenza be prevented?**

The best way to prevent influenza is to get the vaccine at least two weeks before the beginning of the flu season. The vaccine is recommended for any person six months of age and over. The strains used in the seasonal influenza vaccine can change from year to year depending on which viruses are circulating. This year all influenza vaccines will include the following four circulating viruses:

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

The vaccine contains no live virus; only some proteins from the virus surface. It is safe and effective and because there is no live virus it cannot give you influenza. Side effects are usually local (pain and redness at the site) and these resolve within a day. Last year while there were

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very large numbers of cases the hospitalisation was half that expected because of the protection from the vaccine. If you were vaccinated but still got sick, you had a much milder disease course.

It is not recommended to receive the influenza vaccine before about mid-April. It takes about two weeks after vaccination for antibodies to develop in the body and provide protection against the flu. The peak effectiveness of the vaccine occurs in the first 3 to 4 months after getting the vaccine.

Other ways to protect yourself include: washing your hands with soap and running water after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose and before touching other people or objects; covering your coughs and sneezes with the inside of your elbow or tissue and disposing of the tissue in the bin after use. If visiting a GP, call ahead to see if the doctor can place you in a separate room or provide you with a mask. Also, if you are unwell, stay home to avoid spreading the disease.

### **Will the influenza vaccine protect against the Coronavirus (Covid-19)?**

The influenza vaccine only protects against the four circulating influenza viruses. There is currently no vaccine for Covid-19. There is a chance that this winter people will contract both Covid-19 and influenza at the same time with severe consequences. Protecting yourself with a flu vaccine will prevent you from this serious combined illness.

For more information go to: [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/flu](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/flu) and [www2.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation](http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation)