

What is influenza?

Influenza, commonly known as 'the flu', is a viral infection of the breathing passages. It is a highly infectious disease affecting men, women and children around the world each year.

Influenza is passed on (transmitted) when an infected person spreads droplets (through coughing or sneezing) containing virus to another person. Symptoms appear suddenly, beginning with a headache and generally feeling unwell followed by:

- fever
- chills
- cough
- sore throat
- exhaustion

It is often more severe in the elderly and those with certain ongoing (chronic) medical conditions.

Symptoms can last for up to 10 days.

What is the impact of influenza?

Although it is often considered to be a minor illness, influenza can have very serious effects. The effect of the illness extends beyond the healthcare system eg

- Family members caring for sick partners or children
- Potential lost earnings whilst being absent from work
- Missed school days
- Inability to meet sporting commitments and enjoy leisure activities

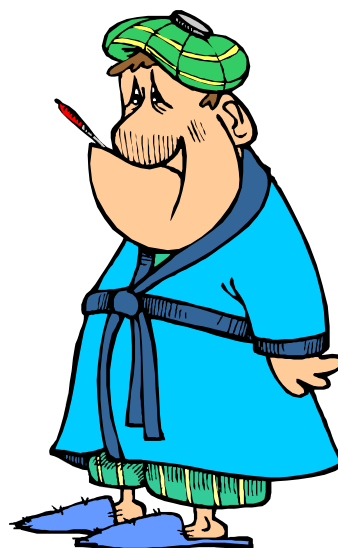
It is estimated that in New Zealand there were 5,650 deaths attributed to influenza from 1980-1992. This is over half the number of deaths resulting from car accidents in the same period.

Is influenza different from a cold?

Yes. Influenza is a more severe viral infection caused by the influenza virus. A cold may often be confused with influenza as many of the symptoms are similar, but influenza sufferers are generally very ill and usually confined to bed.

The difference between influenza and a cold

Influenza	Common Cold
Illness lasts up to 10 days	Symptoms last 4-10 days
Usually a high fever	High fever is less common
Shivering attacks	Shivering attacks are rare
Muscular pains	Infrequent muscular pains
May be bedridden	
Headache (may be severe)	Headache less common
Dry cough may become moist	Cough less severe
Vomit occasionally	Vomit rarely
Can suffer complications (pneumonia)	Complications are less frequent
Vaccine available	No vaccine available



Influenza Vaccination Information



Why should I be vaccinated?

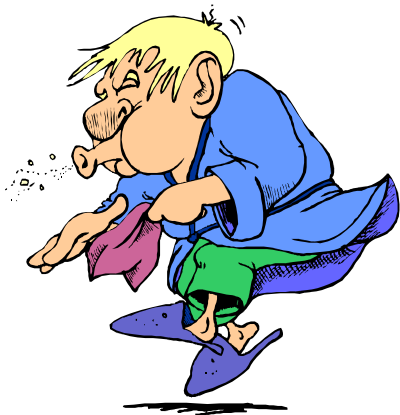
There are obvious advantages to being vaccinated against influenza:

- Less time off work (or school) and potential loss of income
- Less burden on your family, relatives and work colleagues
- Less strain on medical resources
- Less chance of spreading it to others
- Less risk of complications related to pre-existing medical conditions

Who is at risk?

Influenza can affect all age groups, including men, women and children. Elderly patients, those of all ages (including children) with certain chronic medical conditions eg diabetes or asthma, are particularly at risk. Nevertheless, every year many healthy people develop influenza.

In some circumstances influenza can weaken the body's immune system and patients may develop bronchitis and pneumonia. If patients are run-down or stressed then they are more likely to become ill. Unfortunately influenza can lead to hospitalisation and occasionally death in elderly patients and those with chronic medical conditions.



Questions/concerns you may have about vaccinations...

Can you get influenza from having the vaccine?

No. Influenza vaccines do not contain the whole virus, only the part that triggers your body to produce antibodies.

Will the influenza vaccine protect against the common cold?

No. the vaccine will only provide protection against the strains of influenza virus present in the vaccine.

If I have the vaccine, how long does the protection last?

Protection against influenza lasts at least the duration of one influenza season and up to one year.

Why do I have to be vaccinated every year?

The changing nature of the influenza virus means that new strains are constantly appearing. Each year a new influenza vaccine is developed to protect against the anticipated predominant strains in that particular year.

World Health Organisation (WHO) devotes significant resources to maintain world wide identification of the most common influenza strains present in the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

How long does it take for the vaccine to work?

The vaccine takes approximately 10-14 days to provide protection. It is recommended the vaccine is given in April before the winter influenza transmission season begins.

Will an antiviral prevent me developing influenza?

No. Antivirals only relieve symptoms. They need to be used before or soon after infection to be effective. The best protection is still vaccination.

Does the influenza vaccination work?

When vaccine strains match the influenza strains circulating, influenza vaccine prevents illness in up to 90% of healthy adults. While efficacy may be lower in older individuals the vaccine can still be effective in preventing complications, risk of influenza-related hospital admission or death.

Are there any side effects?

Local reactions and fever may occur and are generally mild. Severe allergic reactions may occur rarely.

Can anyone have the vaccine?

People who are known to be allergic to egg proteins or gentamicin should not have the vaccine as trace amounts of these products may remain in the vaccine.

If you have a temperature before the vaccination please discuss it with the nurse.

I'm pregnant. Can I have the vaccine?

A discussion with the nurse is strongly recommended before having the vaccine.

I don't need a vaccination. I'm too healthy.

Healthy individuals are still at risk of influenza and may have symptoms for up to 10 days.

Remember, if you are concerned about any side effects after you are vaccinated contact your health professional immediately. Influenza vaccine is a prescription medicine.