

Influenza

Influenza (the flu) is an infectious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Influenza is not just a 'bad cold' – it is a more serious illness that may lead to hospitalisation, complications and even death, particularly in people with an existing medical condition. Annual influenza immunisation is recommended to get the best protection against influenza.

Anyone of any age can get influenza, no matter how fit and healthy they are. Each year between 10–20% of the population is infected with influenza

How it spreads

Influenza viruses spread mainly from person to person, by being exposed to people with influenza who are coughing and/or sneezing, or by touching something with influenza viruses on it and then touching your mouth or nose. People with influenza can infect others, starting from before they develop symptoms, up to a week or more after becoming sick. Children can infect others for a much longer period of time, even if they have no or very mild symptoms.

How to avoid getting influenza

Having an influenza immunisation each year is the best protection against influenza. Annual immunisation is needed for two reasons: firstly because protection lessens over time; and secondly because, each year, influenza can be caused by different influenza viruses that were not included in the previous year's vaccine. Each year the influenza vaccine contains the three strains most likely to occur that flu season.

Influenza immunisation

The flu vaccine is available from 1 April each year. To learn more about how to get it and find out if you're eligible visit: <https://www.immunise.health.nz/about-vaccines/nz-immunisations/flu-influenza-vaccine/>

How to know if you have influenza

The symptoms of influenza can be similar to the symptoms of other respiratory illnesses. You can't be sure you have influenza just based on the symptoms. If clinically indicated, your GP may do a test for influenza if you are within the first few days of the start of your illness.

Symptoms

Influenza can cause mild or severe illness, and is different from a cold. Illness due to influenza usually starts suddenly, and may include the following symptoms, called 'flu-like symptoms':

- Fever (38°C or higher)
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Chills
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Extreme tiredness
- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea (more common in children)

Treatment

While immunisation each year is the best protection against influenza, antiviral medicines such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) can be used to treat influenza. To be effective, the medicines must usually be started within the first 2 days (48 hours) after symptoms start. A GP or pharmacist can tell you more.

If you're sick

Most healthy people recover from influenza without complications.

- Stay at home so you are less likely to infect others.
- Rest and drink plenty of fluids.
- Take paracetamol for fever and aches. Do not give medication containing aspirin to children under 14.
- Remember that serious illness from influenza is more likely in people aged 65 and older, young children, pregnant women, people who are morbidly obese and people with certain chronic medical conditions – if in any doubt, call and/or see your GP.

Warning signs – get urgent medical attention

Seek urgent medical attention if:

- In babies and children: Fast, noisy breathing or difficulty breathing; not drinking enough fluids;

drowsy, not waking up or not responding; very pale; limp; very irritable, child does not want to be held; flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough than before; fever with a rash; severe or persistent vomiting; seizures (convulsions).

- In adults: Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath; chest pain; high fever that doesn't come down (especially if you are pregnant); chills or severe shaking; dizziness; confusion; severe or persistent vomiting; seizures (convulsions).

Seeking health advice

For non-urgent health advice you can contact your GP or call Healthline – 0800 611 116. Healthline is a free, 24 hour per day telephone health advice service.

How to stop the spread of influenza

- If you are sick, stay away from others until you are well.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue (or cough or sneeze into your elbow if you don't have a tissue).
- Put used tissues in the rubbish bin.
- Wash and dry your hands often, or use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Keep surfaces clean at home, school and work.

For more information visit: <https://info.health.nz/flu-influenza>