



# Flu Vaccinations

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is the flu?**

The flu is a highly contagious viral infection that can cause severe illness and life-threatening complications, including pneumonia. The flu is spread by contact with fluids from coughs and sneezes.

### **How is the flu different to a cold?**

While the flu and a cold have some overlapping symptoms, they are different in terms of both symptom severity and duration. A cold usually has more nasal symptoms which can last a few days, whereas the flu can last up to 2 weeks and tends to cause higher fever, muscle pains and shivering. Serious complications can occur from the flu, particularly in children, the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions (i.e. people with lowered immunity, certain heart conditions etc.), and this tends to be why it is a more serious concern than just a bad cold.

### **What are symptoms of the flu?**

The flu (influenza) is a highly contagious illness which is caused by the influenza virus. After the virus enters the body, it readily infects the respiratory tract. There are a number of different forms that the flu may take due to its constantly changing nature, so people are not normally able to defend themselves against the flu without appropriate vaccination.

Symptoms of the flu can include:

- High fever, chills and sweating
- Sore throat
- Weakness and general muscle/ joint pains (normally in the legs and back)
- Headaches
- Dry cough, that can later become chesty and productive (mucous is coughed up).

### **How do you catch the flu?**

The flu is spread from person to person very easily by airborne fluids when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can then infect someone through their eyes, nose or mouth. Surfaces (i.e. table tops, door handles, pens, cups etc.) can become contaminated by these fluids, and when someone comes into direct contact with these surfaces and touches their eyes, nose or mouth they may become infected with the flu.

### **Is the flu preventable?**

There are a range of preventative measures you can take to minimize the likelihood of getting the flu. The best thing you can do is to get vaccinated each year. You should also ensure that hands are washed thoroughly and regularly, along with frequent use of hand sanitiser to reduce the spread of the flu.

### **Why is getting vaccinated/immunised so important?**

Your best protection against the flu is to get vaccinated. Immunisation not only protects you against potentially suffering from the flu (and the potential serious complications associated with that), but it also protects those around you. Being fully immunised prevents you potentially transmitting the flu to your loved ones and anyone who you may come into contact with, resulting in a healthier community. The more people who are vaccinated in the general public the lower the risk of infection to those who either cannot be immunised (due to illness or allergy) or are at higher risk of complications from contracting the flu. Having your flu shot not only is not a good thing for you, but for everyone!

### **Who is entitled to receive a free flu vaccine under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) from their GP or alternative immunisation provider?**

- Children 6mths - 5 yrs
- People aged 65 years and over
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait people aged six months to less than five years
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are aged 15 years and over
- Pregnant women
- People aged six months and over with medical conditions that can lead to complications from influenza such as people who have heart disease; lung disease, asthma, diabetes, renal failure; or chronic neurological condition, including multiple sclerosis and seizure disorders; or an immune compromising condition, including HIV infection;

### **Can I still get vaccinated if I'm not entitled under the National Immunisation Program?**

Yes, anyone can be vaccinated, however there will be a small charge for the vaccine itself of \$15. The appointment for the vaccination will still be bulk billed.

### **When is flu vaccination not appropriate?**

For certain patients, vaccination may not be appropriate unless they have discussed it with their GP. People who this might apply to include;

- Patients who have had a previous severe reaction to the flu vaccine
- Patients who currently have an illness resulting in a fever greater than or equal to 38.5°C
- People with a lowered immunity caused by either a medical condition or medical treatment.
- Patient with a history of Guillian Barré syndrome
- Patient with a bleeding disorder or severe chronic diseases

If you are in any way unsure as to whether or not the flu vaccine is appropriate for you, it is always best to check with your GP before receiving the flu vaccine.

### **How long will the appointment take?**

Your appointment will take approx. 10 mins. Following your vaccination, you will be asked to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes to observe for any adverse reaction to the injection.

### **Are There Any Health Hazards Associated With The Flu Vaccination If I Am Pregnant?**

The flu vaccination is considered safe for both mother-to-be and baby. In fact, it is highly recommended that pregnant women are immunised against the flu in any trimester. Similarly, there are no known health hazards for mothers or children who are breast-feeding.

### **Is The Vaccine Safe If I have an Egg Allergy**

Based on prospective and retrospective studies of influenza vaccination in those with and without egg allergy (including egg anaphylaxis), the presence of egg allergy does not increase the risk of allergic reactions to the influenza vaccine. Following your vaccination, you will be asked to stay in the immediate area of the clinic for 15 minutes to observe for any adverse reaction to the injection.

### **I got vaccinated last year; do I need to get the flu vaccine again this year?**

The influenza virus changes from year-to-year, and any previous flu shot may no longer be effective. Each year the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends which strain of the flu virus Australians should be immunized against to best protect themselves. These strains are included in the vaccines provided.

### **How effective is the flu vaccine?**

The effectiveness of the influenza vaccine can depend on a number of factors. These include: age, existing medical conditions as well as the similarity between the virus strains included in the vaccine with those circulating in the community. Getting vaccinated is the most effective way to prevent contracting the flu, however it is not a guarantee that you will not be infected.

### **Am I protected from the flu straight after being vaccinated?**

Your immune system takes time to actively defend against the flu, and it may take up to 3 weeks to reach maximum protection. This protection normally continues through for a full year. This is why the best time to be vaccinated is in March to early May to allow for full protection during peak flu season (July-Sept).

### **Are there side effects of the flu vaccine?**

While there are side effects associated with flu vaccination, most are very mild and short term (normally lasting no more than 48 hours). In children under five years of age these side effects may be more noticeable. They may include:

- Drowsiness or tiredness
- Muscle aches
- Localised pain, redness and swelling at the injection site
- Occasionally, an injection-site lump (nodule) that may last many weeks but needs no treatment
- Low-grade temperature (fever)
- While routine paracetamol is not recommended after every vaccination, it can be used if a fever develops

Very rarely more serious side effects can occur, however these tend to be allergic (anaphylactic) reactions to components in the vaccine.

Should you be concerned that your side effects are persisting for too long, are more severe or are concerning you, be sure to contact your GP, go to your nearest hospital emergency room or, if required, call 000.