

Flu Fact Sheet

How serious is seasonal influenza?

- Influenza is a potentially fatal disease that is estimated to cause more deaths than accidents on Australian roads: between 1500 and 3000 deaths.
- Experts estimate that influenza in Australia causes more than 18,000 hospitalisations and 300,000 GP consultations per year.
- Between 5% and 20% of the Australian population may be infected with influenza each year.
- Children are much more likely to contract influenza in any given season: 20-50% compared with 10-30% in adults. Up to 70% of children become infected with the virus during a pandemic.

How contagious is influenza?

Studies have shown that influenza can survive for:

- an hour or more in the air in enclosed environments
- more than 8 hours on hard surfaces such as stainless steel and plastic
- up to 15 minutes if transferred from tissues to hands
- up to 5 minutes after transfer from the environmental surfaces.¹

Note: Adults can be contagious one day before getting symptoms and up to 5 days after becoming ill. This means that you can spread the influenza virus before you even know you are infected.

¹ National Library of Medicine, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/6282993/>

Who is at risk?

- People with underlying medical conditions
- heart conditions
- severe asthma
- COPD and other lung conditions
- diabetes (type 1 and type 2)
- kidney problems
- impaired immunity such as HIV infection
- malignant cancers
- chronic neurological disorders
- Pregnant women
- People ≥ 65 years of age, residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities,
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island adults aged ≥ 15 years are at increased risk of severe complications from influenza.

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Who else should be protected by vaccination?

People who care for or are in close contact with at-risk individuals are advised to protect themselves against influenza to avoid passing on the disease.

Vaccination is also recommended for travellers and many otherwise healthy Australians who wish to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza.

How can you reduce your risk of catching influenza?

There are a number of things people can do to protect themselves against influenza:

- vaccination is the single most effective way of protecting yourself against influenza infection
- hand washing and personal hygiene, such as trying not to touch your mouth or nose are also important preventative measures
- where possible, avoid crowds during the flu season.

What can you do if you fall ill with influenza?

Influenza is highly contagious and can be spread for up to a day before symptoms appear and for five days afterwards.

Eleven ways to aid recovery and avoid spreading influenza:

- stay home
- rest and keep warm
- consume plenty of liquids
- do not consume alcohol
- wash hands regularly
- cover nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing
- avoid physical contact with others
- avoid mixing with other people, particularly those in a high-risk category, while contagious
- stop smoking or cut your consumption down as much as you can
- make sure someone can check on you and do your shopping
- don't return to work early, you could still be contagious.

Antiviral medications can limit the effect of influenza if they are taken early after onset of symptoms (within the first two days of the illness). They are available on prescription only.

Therefore, it is important to see your GP immediately if you believe you're suffering influenza and wish to reduce the duration of your illness.