**What is seasonal influenza?**

Seasonal influenza (or “flu”) is most often caused by type A or B influenza viruses. Symptoms include sudden onset of fever, cough (usually dry), headache, muscle and joint pain, sore throat and a runny nose. The cough can be severe and can last 2 or more weeks. Most people recover from fever and other symptoms within a week without requiring medical attention. However, influenza can cause severe illness or death in high-risk groups (see **Who is most at risk?** below).

Seasonal epidemics in the Southern Hemisphere occur mainly between April to September however, the Covid pandemic is continuing to change the influenza patterns in the Northern Hemisphere as evidenced by the recent events of 2022 in the Northern Hemisphere so we need to be aware of this.

**How can I avoid getting the Flu?**

The best way to avoid getting the flu is to get the flu vaccine every year. Influenza viruses evolve constantly and twice a year WHO makes recommendations to update the vaccine compositions.

WHO recommends annual vaccination for high-risk groups including health care workers. People should ideally get vaccinated just before the influenza season begins for the most effective coverage, although getting vaccinated at any time during the influenza season can still help prevent flu infections.

**Who is most at risk?**

People most at risk for severe seasonal influenza are:

* pregnant women at any stage of pregnancy
* children younger than 5 years
* people older than 65 years
* people with chronic medical conditions such as HIV/AIDS, asthma, heart and lung diseases and diabetes
* people with increased risk of exposure to influenza, which includes health care workers.

**How is it treated ?**

People with the flu should drink plenty of water and rest. Most people will recover within a week. Antiviral drugs for influenza can reduce severe complications and deaths although influenza viruses can develop resistance to the drugs.

They are especially important for high-risk groups. Ideally these drugs need to be administered early (within 48 hours of onset of symptoms). Antibiotics are not effective against influenza viruses.

**How do you stop it from spreading?**

Influenza can spread quickly between people when an infected person coughs or sneezes, dispersing droplets of the virus into the air. It can be also spread by hands contaminated by the virus.

Precautionary measures should be taken to limit transmission. People should cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing, then throw it out and wash their hands thoroughly and regularly.

**Myths**

**Myth 1: Influenza is not serious so I don’t need the vaccine**

**Fact:** As many as 650 000 people a year can die of the flu. This only represents respiratory deaths, so the likely impact is even higher. Even healthy people can get the flu, but especially people whose immune systems are vulnerable. Most people will recover within a few weeks, but some can develop complications including sinus and ear infections, pneumonia, heart or brain inflammations.

**Myth 2: The flu vaccine can give me the flu**

**Fact:** The injected flu vaccine contains an inactivated virus that cannot give you influenza. If you feel achy or slightly feverish, it is a normal reaction of the immune system to the vaccine, and generally lasts only a day or two.

**Myth 3: The flu vaccine can cause severe side effects**

**Fact:** The flu vaccine is proven to be safe. Severe side effects are extremely rare. One in a million people may get Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), which cause muscle weakness and paralysis.

**Myth 4: I had the vaccine and still got the flu, so it doesn’t work**

**Fact:** Several flu viruses are circulating all the time, which is why people may still get the flu despite being vaccinated since the vaccine is specific to one strain. However, being vaccinated improves the chance of being protected from the flu. This is especially important to stop the virus affecting people with vulnerable immune systems.

**Myth 5: I am pregnant so shouldn’t get the flu vaccine**

**Fact:**Pregnant women should especially get the flu vaccine since their immune systems are weaker than usual. The inactivated flu vaccine is safe at any stage of pregnancy.