

Influenza (Flu)

Patient Information Sheet

WHAT IS THE FLU?

The flu is a highly contagious infection caused by the influenza virus. The most common type is the “seasonal” flu; it has different forms, for example, “type A” and “type B.” The flu season in Australia is during winter, commonly from May to September.

There are other types of flu that can be transmitted from animals to humans, for example the swine flu, which caused a worldwide outbreak (“pandemic”) in 2009 and 2010, and the bird flu or avian flu.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON FLU SYMPTOMS?

- Fever (temperature higher than 37.8°C)
- Extreme tiredness
- Headache or body aches
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny nose

Flu symptoms can come on very suddenly.

IS THE FLU DANGEROUS?

It can be. While most people get over the flu on their own and without any lasting problems, some people need to go to the hospital and some people even die from the flu. This is because the flu can cause a serious lung infection called pneumonia. That’s why it’s important to try not to catch the flu in the first place.

People at higher risk of getting very sick from the flu include:

- People 65 or older
- Very young children
- Pregnant women
- People with certain other medical problems including heart disease and lung disease as well as other chronic health problems

IS THERE A TEST FOR THE FLU?

Yes. There are tests for the flu. Not everyone with flu symptoms needs a test, but in some cases – for example, if you are at risk for having other problems caused by the flu – your doctor might do a test for flu.

HOW DO PEOPLE CATCH THE FLU?

The Flu is spread easily from person to person by coughing, sneezing and touching surfaces.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF FROM THE FLU?

You can:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use alcohol hand rub
- Stay away from people you know are sick with flu type symptoms
- Get the flu vaccine every year – Some years the flu vaccine is more effective than others. But even in years when it is less effective, it still helps prevent some cases of the flu. It can also help keep you from getting severely ill if you do get the flu.

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WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I GET THE FLU?

Isolate:

If you think you have the flu you should stay home from work, school or other populated areas until you are feeling better. You are usually infectious to others for about 5 days after the illness starts, although children can remain infectious for about 2 weeks. You can reduce the risk of passing the infection on to family members and friends by washing your hands often especially after coughing and sneezing. A facemask may help prevent household transmission. Also, always cover your mouth and nose with the inside of your elbow when you cough or sneeze.

Rest and hydrate:

You should rest, and drink plenty of fluids.

Medicate:

You can also take paracetamol (panadol) or a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory like ibuprofen (Nurofen) to relieve fever and aches (check with your GP that these medications are ok for you). Cough medications can be used if your cough is bothering you but are not usually particularly helpful and may have potential side effects. The cough associated with the flu goes away by itself in most cases.

Most people with the flu get better on their own within 1 to 2 weeks. But you should seek further medical care if you:

- have trouble breathing or are short of breath
- feel pain or pressure in your chest or belly
- get suddenly dizzy
- feel confused
- have severe vomiting

Take your child to the doctor if he or she:

- starts breathing fast or has trouble breathing
- starts to turn blue or purple
- is not drinking enough fluids
- will not wake up or will not interact with you
- is so unhappy that he or she does not want to be held
- gets better from the flu but then gets sick again with a fever or cough

You may be asked to wear a mask in the Emergency Department (ED) or to wait someplace where you are less likely to spread your infection.

CAN THE FLU BE TREATED?

Yes, people with the flu can get medicines called antiviral medicines. These medicines can help people avoid some of the problems caused by the flu. Not every person with the flu needs an antiviral medicine, your doctor will decide if you need it. Antibiotics **do not work** on the flu.

WHAT IF I AM PREGNANT?

The flu can be very dangerous for pregnant women. If you are pregnant, it is very important that you get the flu vaccine. You should also avoid taking care of anyone who has the flu.

If you are pregnant you should seek medical attention if:

- You might have been near someone with the flu.
- You think you might be coming down with the flu.

In pregnant women, the symptoms of the flu can get worse very quickly. The flu can even cause trouble breathing or lead to death of the woman or her baby. That is why it is so important to seek medical attention as soon as you notice any flu symptoms. You will need an antiviral medicine if you are pregnant and have the flu.

This handout was developed by Dr Jonathan Karro, Clinical Director of Emergency Medicine, in conjunction with the Influenza Like Illness Planning Group. March 2018.



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