What is influenza?
Influenza (often called flu) is a respiratory infection caused by the influenza virus of which there are 3 types; A, B and C, each with many subtypes or strains. Types A and B cause most of the disease in humans. Influenza viruses are characterised by the way they mutate over time thereby forming new strains and evading the immune system. Because of this, vaccine is formulated annually to best match the strains predicted for the coming influenza season.

How is it spread?
Influenza is spread from person to person through respiratory droplets produced during coughing and sneezing. It may also be spread when others touch surfaces contaminated by the droplets and then transfer the infection to their mouth and eyes, where the virus can enter the body. The incubation period is short, usually 1-3 days.

What are the symptoms?
The presentation of influenza illness often has an abrupt onset with symptoms including; tiredness, fever, headache, chills, sore throat, loss of appetite and muscle aches. There may be an associated cough, nasal discharge and sneezing.

How serious is influenza?
The severity of influenza depends on the strain, the patient’s age, previous exposure to the strain and the presence of other medical conditions. Those at increased risk for severe disease or dying from influenza are listed in the groups recommended for annual vaccination.

What is the infectious period?
Adults are infectious from the day prior to and up to 7 days after the onset of symptoms while children may remain infectious for 10 days. Immunosuppressed people may shed the virus for weeks. The ability to transmit the virus is higher when cough and fever are present.

What is the treatment?
Treatment for influenza includes rest, increased fluids and pain relief. Anti-viral medications such as Oseltamivir or Zanamivir can shorten the duration of symptoms and lessen the severity of the illness but are most effective if given within 48 hours of onset.

How can it be prevented?
Annual vaccination is recommended especially for those most at risk of serious disease or poor outcomes. The influenza vaccine is a safe and effective vaccine that protects against 4 strains of influenza. It does not contain any live virus, so people cannot catch influenza from having the vaccine. However, it does take about 2 weeks before the body is protected after vaccination. If you are exposed to someone with influenza infection during this time you may still become sick because your protective immune response has not yet fully developed.

To stop the spread of disease, people should cough into their upper arm or cover their mouths, with a tissue if possible, when coughing and wash their hands regularly. Regular hand-washing and disposing of tissues into the bin immediately, even when not coughing, may also help to prevent influenza. People with flu symptoms should stay at home and seek medical treatment as needed.

Annual influenza vaccination recommendations
Who is eligible for FREE influenza vaccine?
1. All children 6 months to <5 years.
2. All Indigenous people aged 6 months and older.
3. All people aged 65 years and older with a new trivalent higher immunogenicity vaccine.
4. All pregnant women during any stage of pregnancy.
5. People aged 6 months and over with conditions predisposing them to complications from influenza including:
   - cardiac disease (including congenital heart disease, coronary artery disease and valvular rheumatic heart disease).
• chronic liver disease
• chronic kidney disease
• chronic lung disease (including, bronchiectasis, emphysema and cystic fibrosis)
• severe asthma (requiring frequent hospital visits and multiple medications)
• diabetes and other chronic metabolic diseases requiring regular medical follow-up
• chronic neurological conditions that can affect respiratory function
• haemoglobinopathies
• children 6 months to 10 years old on long-term aspirin therapy
• immunosuppression, immunodeficiency or are receiving high dose immunosuppressive therapy (including HIV infection, asplenia or splenic dysfunction)

NB: Children 6 months to <9 years of age who are receiving influenza vaccine for the first time, and people of any age who have recently had a haematopoietic stem cell transplant or solid organ transplant should get 2 doses of vaccine given at least 4 weeks apart. Thereafter 1 dose is sufficient.

Influenza vaccination is recommended but not funded for the following groups
1. People with obesity (BMI ≥ 40Kg/m2).
2. Contacts of high risk patients including staff of nursing homes, long-term care facilities, all health care providers, carers of immunocompromised patients and household contacts of those in high-risk groups.
3. People travelling during the influenza season, especially if to a region where influenza is circulating.
4. Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities (may be eligible for FREE vaccine if included in the groups above).
5. Homeless people and those persons providing care to this group.
6. People working with poultry and pigs.
7. Staff working in early childhood education and care and those who provide essential community services.

These people (or anyone else) can access the vaccine:
• by prescription through their GP
• from some pharmacies
• through employer funded vaccination programs.

When to vaccinate?
The vaccine should be administered every year. It usually becomes available in April each year. The vaccine can be given all year around and is available until the following February each year.

Side effects
• local tenderness at the injection site is common
• fever and malaise occur less frequently (1-10%).
There is a small increased risk of fever and febrile convulsions in children 6 months to <5 years of age who receive influenza vaccine and Prevenar13® at the same time. People with egg allergy, including a history of anaphylaxis, can be safely vaccinated with influenza vaccines.

Further information about vaccines and funding for influenza vaccination is available from your local doctor, health centre or Centre for Disease Control. Information is also available from the Immunise Australia Program website at: http://www.immunise.health.gov.au

For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control.
Alice Springs 8951 7548
Darwin 8922 8804
Katherine 8973 9049
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