

Influenza Vaccination

FAQs for Staff of Aged Care Facilities

What is the flu?

Influenza (flu) is a highly contagious respiratory illness that occurs following infection with the influenza (flu) virus. It is spread from person to person by droplets produced during coughing or sneezing.

Flu can occur at any time throughout the year, but is more common during the winter months (often referred to as the 'flu season').

Flu symptoms usually come on quickly and tend to last for a week or longer. Symptoms of the flu include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, muscle aches, joint pains, headaches, tiredness, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Flu complications include pneumonia, ear and sinus infections, heart and other organ damage, and rarely, inflammation of the brain, brain damage and death.

The flu can sometimes be confused with the common cold, other respiratory viruses or gastrointestinal viruses. The flu is usually more severe and more likely to cause complications.

Why am I recommended to have the vaccine?

All staff (including volunteers) of aged care facilities are recommended to be vaccinated against the flu each year.¹ This includes administrative staff, doctors, nurses and carers, therapists, religious workers, cleaning and kitchen personnel, volunteers and temporary and part time workers.

Healthcare workers are at significantly greater risk of getting the flu as they are more likely to come in contact with the virus because of their work.² They can also spread the flu and are likely to be an important source of infection in residents of aged care facilities. The elderly are at higher risk of serious flu complications including death.

Even without symptoms you can still transmit the virus to others. Infected healthy adults are infectious for 24 hours before symptoms begin and for five to seven days after becoming unwell. Some people infected with the flu have mild or no symptoms. These people can still spread the flu to others.

¹ Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). *The Australian immunisation handbook 10th ed* (2017 update). Canberra: Australian Government Department of Health, 2017.

² Kuster SP, Shah PS, Coleman BL, et al. Incidence of Influenza in Healthy Adults and Healthcare Workers: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *PLoS ONE* 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0026239> (accessed Apr 2018).

Why should I get the vaccine if our residents are vaccinated?

Elderly people do not respond as well to the flu vaccine as healthy adults because the immune system weakens with age. This means they may not be as well protected against the flu as a younger person. By getting the flu vaccine, you are providing an extra layer of protection for your residents. If you don't get the flu, you can't spread it. During high flu activity, there is some evidence that flu vaccination of healthcare workers reduces the risk of influenza-like illness and death in elderly residents of aged care facilities.³

I'm healthy – why should I get the flu vaccine?

Most people who get the flu are unwell for a few days and then recover. However flu can be very serious in some people causing hospitalisation and even death. It is not possible to know who will be severely affected by flu. **Every year, previously healthy people are hospitalised and die from the virus.** The flu vaccine reduces your risk of getting the flu and its potentially serious complications including death.

Even if you don't get severely unwell with the flu, the flu can be an inconvenience causing time off work and visits to the doctor or even hospital.

Flu vaccination also helps to protect those around you including your family, friends and colleagues.

Can the vaccine give me the flu?

No. It is impossible for the flu vaccine to give you the flu as it does not contain live virus.

Some people mistakenly believe that the vaccine causes the flu because:

- An immune response is triggered following vaccination which can produce mild flu-like symptoms that mimic the flu infection. These only last for one to two days.
- It takes two weeks following vaccination to produce protection. Some people may develop the flu during this period because they have come into contact with the virus before or soon after vaccination (but prior to developing protection).
- The common cold or other respiratory viruses may be confused with the flu. The flu vaccine only protects you against the flu virus.
- The flu vaccine is not 100% effective so you can still get the flu from someone who is infected, however your infection will usually be milder.

³ World Health Organization (WHO). Vaccines against influenza WHO position paper - November 2012. *Weekly epidemiological record* 2012;87:461-476. <http://www.who.int/wer/2012/wer8747.pdf> (accessed Apr 2018).

Does the flu vaccine work?

The effectiveness of the vaccine depends on how closely the vaccine matches the circulating strains of flu virus and the person's immune response to the vaccine. The protection provided by the flu vaccine can range from 30% to 70% depending on these factors.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that the flu vaccine is more than 85% effective at protecting healthcare workers against flu.³ But this will change from year to year.

Although it isn't perfect, the flu vaccine is the best protection available. Vaccination can make your illness milder if you do get the flu.

What are the side effects?

Serious reactions to the vaccine are rare. The most common reactions are pain, redness and swelling at the injection site. Fever, sore muscles, and tiredness can also occur but usually only last one to two days after vaccination.

When considering whether to have the vaccine, compare the risks of the flu infection with the risks of receiving the vaccine.

Who can't have the vaccine?

People who have had a severe allergic reaction (called anaphylaxis) after a dose of flu vaccine or any parts of the flu vaccine should NOT receive the vaccine.

People with a history of severe allergic reaction to eggs can be safely vaccinated with flu vaccines in medical facilities with staff experienced in recognising and treating this condition.

The flu vaccine is recommended for pregnant women and is safe to administer during any stage of pregnancy or while breastfeeding.

Why is yearly vaccination recommended?

Every year a new flu vaccine is developed. It protects against the strains of flu expected to cause most illness that year. Protection is strongest in the first three to four months following vaccination. The flu vaccine should be given in autumn each year to provide the best protection against flu.

What else can I do to stop the spread of flu?

Other measures to reduce the spread of flu are:

- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water or alcohol hand rub.
- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue or your elbow – not your hand.

- Put used tissues in the bin straight away.
- Stay at home when you are unwell. It is important **not to attend work** if you have symptoms of flu.

More Information

- Contact the ACT Immunisation Unit, Health Protection Service on (02) 6205 2300
- ACT Health [Influenza](#) and [Influenza Vaccine](#) Fact Sheets
- Immunise Australia Program (www.immunise.health.gov.au)
- National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) (www.ncirs.edu.au)
- Immunisation Specialist Group (www.isg.org.au)

Accessibility

If you have difficulty reading a standard printed document and would like an alternative format, please phone 13 22 81.



Interpreter

If English is not your first language and you need the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS), please call 13 14 50.

For further accessibility information, visit: www.health.act.gov.au/accessibility

www.health.act.gov.au | Phone: 132281 | Publication No XXXXX

© Australian Capital Territory, Canberra April 2018