

Annual Seasonal Influenza Vaccine

Influenza (commonly known as ‘flu’) is a highly contagious viral illness that can affect people of all ages. It is spread from person to person by virus-containing respiratory droplets, produced during coughing or sneezing. Yearly vaccination is the most important measure to prevent flu and its complications.

Between 5-20% of the population are infected with flu each year. It can take 1-3 days to develop symptoms after coming into contact with the virus. Flu can be a debilitating disease causing fever, tiredness, headache, sore muscles, cough, runny nose and sneezing. Complications of flu include bronchitis, croup, ear infections, pneumonia, heart and other organ damage, brain inflammation and brain damage, and death. The disease can greatly affect a person’s quality of life. Work, study, sporting commitments, socialising, holidays and family life can all be affected if a person contracts the disease.

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recommends annual flu vaccination for anyone 6 months of age or over who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with flu. However, some people are at increased risk of flu and its complications. For these people, annual flu vaccination is strongly recommended and is government funded.

Eligibility for free flu vaccine

In the ACT flu vaccination is free* for:

- All children aged 6 months to under 5 years;
- People aged six months and over with certain underlying medical conditions such as severe asthma, heart or lung disease, diabetes and/or weakened immune systems;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over;
- Pregnant women; and
- People aged 65 years and over.

*GPs may charge a consultation fee. You should check this with your GP at the time of booking.

Vaccination of specific at-risk groups

Children

Children aged 6 months to 8 years of age who have flu vaccine for the first time need two doses, at least four weeks apart. This provides a better immune response to the vaccine. For children who have previously received the flu vaccine, only one dose of influenza vaccine is required annually ahead of the flu season.

People aged 65 years and over

In 2018 there are two new age-specific influenza vaccines available free to those aged 65 years and older. These vaccines are formulated to provide increased protection against influenza for older people. One contains a higher content of inactivated (or killed) virus (Fluzone®). The other contains the same inactivated virus content as a standard adult influenza vaccine but is designed specifically to increase the immune system's response to the vaccine (Fluad®).

Although the vaccines are slightly different, they are predicted to be equally protective against influenza for those aged 65 years and older. Consumers are advised that for the 2018 influenza season, natural rubber latex is present in the sheath covering the needle of trivalent influenza vaccine Fluad®. While reactions to latex are rare, anyone who has a severe allergy to latex should not receive Fluad®.

There is no increase in the risk of severe adverse effects with either Fluzone® or Fluad®, compared with other influenza vaccines. However, there is an increased likelihood of redness, pain and swelling at the injection site with these two new vaccines. Fever, sore muscles, and tiredness can also occur but usually only last one to two days after vaccination.

Pregnant women

Influenza infection during pregnancy can lead to premature delivery and even death in newborns and very young babies.

Vaccination remains the best protection pregnant women and newborns have against influenza. Pregnant women can have the vaccine at any time during pregnancy and they benefit from it all through the year.

Influenza vaccine is recommended in every pregnancy to protect both the mother and her unborn child. Vaccination during pregnancy can also protect babies in the first months after birth as protective antibodies are transferred through the placenta from mother to baby.

Influenza vaccine has been shown to be safe during pregnancy. Expected side effects like injection site reactions do not occur more frequently in pregnant women than non-pregnant women.

Medical conditions for which individuals are eligible for free vaccination under the National Immunisation Program

All individuals aged 6 months and over with the following medical risk conditions:

- Cardiac disease, including cyanotic congenital heart disease, coronary artery disease and congestive heart failure;
- Chronic respiratory conditions, including suppurative lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and severe asthma;
- Other chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow up or hospitalisation in the previous year, including diabetes mellitus, chronic metabolic diseases, chronic renal failure, and haemoglobinopathies;
- Chronic neurological conditions that impact on respiratory function, including multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injuries, and seizure disorders;
- Impaired immunity, including HIV, malignancy and chronic steroid use; and
- Children aged 6 months to 10 years on long term aspirin therapy.

When should I or my child be vaccinated against influenza?

Annual vaccination is recommended before the onset of each influenza season. The period of peak influenza circulation is typically June to September. While protection is generally expected to last for the whole season, best protection occurs in the first 3 to 4 months after vaccination. April to June is a good time to be vaccinated against influenza, but it is never too late to vaccinate, since influenza can circulate all year round.

Common side-effects

The most common side-effects after influenza vaccination are redness, pain and swelling at the injection site. Fever, sore muscles, and tiredness can also occur but usually only last one to two days after vaccinations.

In 2017, a follow-up of 74,000 Australian adults and children found no vaccine safety concerns. Vaccine recipients consistently replied that any effects after vaccination were generally mild and within expected ranges.

Contraindications to influenza vaccine

People who have had a severe allergic reaction (or anaphylaxis) after a dose of influenza vaccine or any parts of the vaccine should not be vaccinated.

Egg allergies

Influenza vaccines available in Australia are grown in eggs. However, due to new vaccine manufacturing processes the amount of material from egg in the vaccine is small. Recent studies have shown people with egg allergy, including egg-induced anaphylaxis can be safely vaccinated with influenza vaccine.

People with a history of non-anaphylactic egg allergy can receive an age-appropriate, full dose of the vaccine in any immunisation setting:

People with a history of severe reaction, or anaphylaxis to eggs, should be vaccinated in medical facilities with staff experienced in recognising and treating this condition:

Persons with a history of Guillain- Barré syndrome

Persons with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) have an increased likelihood in general of developing GBS again, and the chance of them coincidentally developing the syndrome following influenza vaccination may be higher than in persons with no history of GBS. Individual concerns should be discussed and expert advice sought from the treating physician and/or an immunisation specialist when considering influenza vaccination for a person with a history of GBS.

Need more information?

For more information about flu vaccination contact the Health Protection Service, Immunisation Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2300**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Acknowledgements

1. Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). *The Australian immunisation handbook* 10th Ed (2018 update). Canberra: Australian Government Department of Health, 2018. Available from: <http://www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/Handbook10-home>.
2. Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). ATAGI advice on seasonal influenza vaccines in 2018. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Health, 2018. Available from: <https://beta.health.gov.au/resources/publications/atagi-advice-on-seasonal-influenza-vaccines-in-2018#>

3. National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance. Influenza Vaccine, Frequently asked questions, 2018 Available from: <http://www.ncirs.edu.au/provider-resources/ncirs-fact-sheets/>
4. National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance. AusVaxSafety news 03/10/2017 – Media Release. 2018 Available from: <http://www.ncirs.edu.au/vaccine-safety/ausvaxsafety-news/>

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