

# Influenza Vaccination

## *FAQs for Staff of Aged Care Facilities*

### What is influenza (the 'flu')?

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

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

Influenza symptoms usually come on quickly and tend to last for a week or longer. Symptoms of influenza infection include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, muscle aches, joint pains, headaches, tiredness, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Complications can 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. Influenza infection 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 influenza each year.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 complications from influenza infection 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 influenza have mild or no symptoms. These people can still spread the virus to others.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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 influenza vaccine as healthy adults because the immune system weakens with age. This means they may not be as well protected against influenza infection as a younger person. By getting the influenza 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 times of high influenza infection activity, there is some evidence that vaccination of healthcare workers reduces the risk of influenza-like illness and death in elderly residents of aged care facilities.<sup>3</sup>

## I'm healthy – why should I get the influenza vaccine?

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

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

## Can the vaccine give me the flu?

**No.** The influenza vaccine cannot give you influenza (the 'flu'). The vaccine does not contain live influenza 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, like fever or headache, for a few days after the vaccine.
- 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 influenza 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 influenza 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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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 influenza vaccine work?

The effectiveness of the vaccine depends on how closely the vaccine matches the circulating strains of influenza virus and the person's immune response to the vaccine. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that the flu vaccine is more than 85% effective at protecting healthcare workers against influenza.<sup>3</sup> But this will change from year to year.

Although it isn't perfect, the influenza 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 any vaccine, it is a balance of the risks of the infection, in this case influenza, with the side effects of receiving the vaccine.

## Do I need to get a COVID-19 test if I develop symptoms after the influenza vaccine?

As a RACF staff member, if you develop cold and flu-like symptoms after getting the influenza vaccine you should not work while you are unwell.

As a RACF staff member, if you have **any** of the following you should get tested for COVID-19:

- respiratory symptoms such as sore throat, cough, runny or blocked nose, loss of taste or smell, or shortness of breath
- a fever
- fatigue, headache, muscle or joint pain, chills or fever that are severe, or last longer than 48 hours after vaccination.

Stay home until you receive your test results and your symptoms have resolved. Notify your employer that you are unable to work during this time.

## Who can't have the vaccine?

The only absolute reason for not having the influenza vaccine is anaphylaxis following a previous dose of any influenza vaccine and anaphylaxis following any vaccine component.

Influenza vaccination is generally not recommended for people with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) whose first episode occurred with 6 weeks of receiving an influenza vaccine. Persons with a history of GBS whose first episode was not after influenza vaccination have an extremely low risk of recurrence of GBS after vaccination and the influenza vaccination is recommended.

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

## Do I need to wait to have the influenza vaccine if I have just had the COVID-19 vaccine?

Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) advice is that administration of an influenza and a COVID-19 vaccine should be a minimum of 14 days apart.

It doesn't matter in what order you get the vaccines.

When you are booking or attending an appointment for your influenza vaccine, remember to tell your vaccination provider or clinic if you have received the COVID-19 vaccine (and when you received it). This will help them to plan your appointment.

## Why is yearly vaccination recommended?

Every year a new influenza vaccine is developed. It protects against the strains of influenza expected to cause most illness that year. Protection is strongest in the first three to four months following vaccination. The best time to get the influenza vaccine is before winter and flu season, however it is never too late to have the vaccination. It takes about two weeks to develop immunity following vaccination.

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

Other measures to reduce the spread of influenza virus 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.
- Adhere to social distancing rules and guidelines
- 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
- National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) ([www.ncirs.edu.au](http://www.ncirs.edu.au))
- Immunisation Specialist Group ([www.isg.org.au](http://www.isg.org.au))
- [Department of Health](#) information about influenza vaccination

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