



# Flu (influenza) vaccine

- **Flu is a highly contagious disease.**
- **Some people are at risk of serious health complications if they get flu.**
- **People most at risk of serious complications from flu are eligible for free flu vaccinations (refer to list below).**
- **You should get vaccinated against the flu every year.**

Influenza, commonly known as flu, is a highly contagious disease caused by the influenza virus.

Everyone is encouraged to get the flu vaccine, but it is strongly recommended the following groups are immunised because they are at higher risk of serious complications from flu:

- pregnant women
- children
- the elderly
- Aboriginal individuals of all ages
- people with certain health conditions such as heart or kidney disease or a weakened immune system.

Flu can make existing medical conditions worse, and can cause high fever and pneumonia. It is easily spread by coughing, sneezing, or touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your mouth or nose. Good hand hygiene is important to prevent the spread of flu and other infections.

## Why should children get the flu vaccine?

Rates of flu infection and hospitalisation are highest among young children.

Children who become infected with flu can develop serious illnesses, including convulsions (seizures or fits) and diarrhoea.

The majority of childhood flu-related hospitalisations and deaths occur among children without underlying medical conditions.

## Who receives the vaccine free?

Under the Australian Government's National Immunisation Program the following groups can receive a free flu vaccine:

- pregnant women
- children aged 6 months to less than 5 years
- people 65 years and older
- Aboriginal individuals 6 months and older
- people 6 months and older with medical conditions that put them at risk of severe flu, including:
  - heart disease
  - kidney disease
  - chronic respiratory conditions
  - chronic illnesses that required regular medical attention or hospitalisation in the previous year
  - chronic neurological conditions
  - impaired immunity
  - children aged 6 months to 10 years receiving long-term aspirin therapy.

**Note:** The vaccine is free however you may be charged a consultation fee. Check costs when making an appointment.

## Is the flu vaccine safe?

AusVaxSafety is a national program to monitor the type and rate of reactions to each year's new influenza vaccine in young children.



In the 2016 flu season there were no vaccine-attributable serious adverse events recorded for the patients in this program.

The flu vaccine triggers an immune response that can protect you from becoming ill if you are exposed to the influenza virus.

The flu vaccine cannot cause flu as it is made from the killed virus, not living viruses.

All vaccines available in Australia must pass strict safety testing before being approved for use by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

### **Is the flu vaccine safe for children?**

Flu vaccines are safe and children worldwide have been vaccinated against the flu for many years.

### **What about flu vaccine and febrile convulsions in children?**

Febrile convulsions (fever related seizures or fits) after flu vaccination are rare.

By comparison, the flu virus itself is a major cause of febrile convulsions in young children. In a recent study from Europe, the flu virus accounted for 10 per cent of all hospitalisations among children during flu season and 1 in 5 of the children admitted with flu had a febrile convulsion.

### **Who should not have the vaccine?**

The only reason not to have the flu vaccine is following a severe (anaphylaxis) reaction to a previous dose of flu vaccine, or to any component of any vaccine.

Speak with your GP or immunisation provider for advice. Allergic reactions to flu vaccine are rare. If you are unwell, talk to your doctor about whether to reschedule your vaccination.

### **What if I am travelling overseas?**

If you are travelling, check the Smartraveller website ([www. http://smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au)) for travel advice about international influenza outbreaks.

Travellers should consider getting the flu vaccine before travelling to countries with influenza outbreaks.

### **What are the risks?**

Any medicine, including the flu vaccine, can have potentially serious side effects, such as severe allergic reaction. However, the risk of the flu vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small.

### **Common side effects**

Common side effects include:

- low-grade fever
- muscle aches
- soreness, swelling and redness and a small lump at the injection site.

These symptoms normally occur soon after you received the vaccine, last 1 to 2 days, and resolve without requiring specific treatment.

### **Severe side effects**

If you or someone in your care experiences a severe reaction to the flu vaccine after you have left the doctor or immunisation clinic, call an ambulance (000) or go to a hospital emergency department immediately.

Severe side effects from the flu vaccine include:

- difficulty breathing
- hoarse voice or wheezing
- pale complexion
- coughing
- hives
- losing consciousness.



Consult your doctor if you experience any other unusual symptoms after vaccination including:  
high fever

- convulsions
- behaviour changes.

## How often do I need to have the vaccine to be protected?

Protection usually lasts around 3 to 4 months, so you should have the vaccination at the start of each flu season. Influenza viruses constantly change. Every year scientists try to match the vaccine to the strains most likely to cause flu.

After vaccination, it can take up to 2 weeks to develop protection.

It's important to have your flu vaccination in late autumn to allow time to develop protection before the flu season starts and to ensure it lasts through the flu season which usually peaks in Perth in August.

It is never too late to get the flu vaccine.

## What happens after the vaccination?

If you or your child starts to develop a fever after a vaccination take or give your child paracetamol as directed on the manufacturers recommendation – this will depend on your weight and age. Contact your doctor if high fever (over 38.5 C) persists or if you are concerned.

Drink extra fluids and wear light-weight, loose clothing.

## How do I report an adverse event?

Western Australian Vaccine Safety Surveillance System (WAVSS) is the central reporting service in WA for any significant adverse events following immunisation.

If you have experienced an adverse reaction to a vaccine:

- visit the WA Vaccine Safety Surveillance (WAVSS) website  
<https://wavss.health.wa.gov.au>
- phone WAVSS on (08) 9321 1312 (8.30am to 4.30pm).

## Where can I get vaccinated?

The flu vaccine is available in metropolitan and country WA from immunisation providers including GP clinics, community health clinics and Aboriginal Medical Services.

For further information, contact your GP or immunisation provider.

## More information

- Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA)  
[www.tga.gov.au](http://www.tga.gov.au)
- Western Australian Vaccine Safety Surveillance (WAVSS) system  
<https://wavss.health.wa.gov.au>
- Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI)  
[www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

## Where to get help

- For emergency or life-threatening conditions, visit an emergency department or dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance
- See your doctor
- Visit a GP after hours
- Ring *healthdirect* on 1800 022 222

Produced by the Communications Directorate  
© Department of Health 2017