Immunisation and the Flu

What is immunisation?
Immunisation utilises the body’s natural defence mechanism – the immune system – to build resistance to an infection. The vaccine contains inactive particles of the virus that are used to stimulate your body’s own immune response without causing you to actually contract the virus.

What is Influenza? The ‘Flu’
- A highly contagious viral illness caused by the Influenza virus
- Is much more severe than the common cold
- Symptoms may include: rapid onset of fever, muscle aches, joint pains, headache, sore throat and cough
- Most symptoms resolve within 7 days, although cough and tiredness may last 2 weeks or more
- Can be followed by a secondary illness e.g., pneumonia
- Infection most common during Winter
- Majority of cases can be prevented by immunisation.
Most people think that when they have a runny nose or a sore throat that they have the ‘flu’. This is not the case. They usually have a common cold, which is a short-term, mild illness. Colds are caused by a range of viruses other than influenza. Although the symptoms of a cold cause inconvenience, they rarely cause significant debility.

A patient with true influenza is often so unwell that they are confined to rest in bed. It can last up to 14 days and can be complicated by a range of problems, including pneumonia, and even death especially in high-risk individuals, such as the elderly, those with chronic illnesses or impaired immune systems. A flu outbreak occurs most years and sometimes a major Influenza Pandemic occurs, during which larger numbers of the population are infected.

Can I get the Flu from the vaccination?
No. The vaccine contains only inactivated viral particles (a virus that has been concentrated, killed, then broken apart) and is therefore incapable of causing Influenza infection.
People who develop a runny nose or sore throat after vaccination have usually coincidentally developed another viral illness.

People who develop a low-grade fever and muscle aches may have developed an anticipated side effect of the vaccine, caused by effective activation of the immune system. Less than 1 in 6 people who get the flu vaccine experience fever or muscle aches, and these symptoms usually resolve within a day or 2.

How effective is the Influenza vaccine?
Influenza vaccination prevents up to 60% of cases of Influenza infection in healthy adults. If a vaccinated person does get influenza, the illness is usually milder in severity and of briefer duration.

Who should be vaccinated?
- Those who wish to reduce their likelihood of becoming ill with influenza
Influenza vaccination is particularly recommended in the following situations:
- Women who are pregnant (during all stages of pregnancy, including the 1st trimester), planning to become pregnant, or who are breastfeeding.
- Those over 65 years of age
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Those with chronic diseases (especially those with chronic heart, lung, kidney and metabolic disorders e.g., diabetes)
- Those who are obese (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²)

To calculate your Body Mass Index (BMI): divide your weight in kilograms (kg) by your height in metres (m) then divide the
answer by your height again to get your BMI.

BMI: underweight: < 18.5; normal weight: 18.5 - 24.9; overweight: 25 - 29.9; obese: ≥ 30 kg/m²

- Those receiving immunosuppressive medication
- Those who could transmit influenza to babies too young to receive influenza vaccination, including parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles
- Those who could transmit influenza to high-risk people, including visitors to aged care facility residents
- All healthcare workers.

I am having other vaccinations. Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

All other vaccinations can be given on the same day as your flu vaccination. Previously it was recommended to wait 7 days between your COVID vaccine and receiving any other vaccination, but new evidence demonstrates the safety and immunogenicity of co-administration of COVID and flu vaccines. There is no need to wait between receiving your influenza vaccine and your COVID vaccine.

I am aged 65 or older, do I need a different type of flu vaccine?

In 2023, Australia is again offering an adjuvanted quadrivalent Influenza Vaccine (QIV), Fluad Quad, for individuals aged 65 years and older. Fluad Quad provides coverage against the same 4 influenza strains included in the standard quadrivalent flu vaccines, but also contains an ingredient that helps create a stronger immune response to vaccination. Fluad Quad is only available under the government’s National Immunisation Program (NIP) and is not available for private purchase. Medimobile is thus unable to supply or administer this type of flu vaccine. If you are aged 65+, we suggest you see your GP to access this higher immunogenicity flu vaccine.

It is important for all individuals in this age group (65+ years) to be vaccinated. If you are aged 65 or older and are unlikely to visit your GP to receive the Fluad Quad vaccine, it is recommended that you proceed with one of the quadrivalent Influenza vaccines Medimobile is able to provide.

How often is Flu vaccination required?

Once per year.

How long does it take for me to be protected and how long does my protection last?

You will form natural antibodies to fight the Flu around 3 – 14 days after receiving your immunisation. Your antibodies will peak at around 4-6 weeks – this is when you are optimally protected. Your antibodies will gradually reduce, but you will remain protected for around 1 year.

Why do I need to be vaccinated every year?

The prevalent Influenza virus strains change each year through a process called antigenic drift. Therefore, the vaccine constituents are changed accordingly. Each year, the World Health Organization predicts the 4 strains that will be most prevalent, and the vaccine manufacturers then formulate their vaccines to cover these 4 strains.

What strains does the 2023 vaccine protect me against?

The 2023 Quadrivalent Influenza Vaccine (QIV) protects against the 4 most likely flu strains to circulate in the Southern Hemisphere in 2023:

- an A/Sydney/5/2021 (H1N1)pdm09-like virus;
- an A/Darwin/9/2021 (H3N2)-like virus;
- a B/Austria/1359417/2021 (B/Victoria lineage)-like virus; and
- a B/Phuket/3073/2013 (B/Yamagata lineage)-like virus.

Why doesn’t the vaccinator wipe my arm with alcohol first?

It is no longer recommended to wipe the arm with alcohol first (unless the arm is visibly dirty) as it may interfere with the flu vaccine, and can make the injection more painful. Large scientific studies have shown no increased risk of side-effects or infection now that we no longer routinely clean the arm with alcohol. Your vaccinator will have cleaned their hands with alcohol and in some cases, they will wear rubber gloves to protect themselves from a needle injury.
Who should not be given the vaccine?
Being a highly purified, inactivated vaccine, there are very few contraindications to Influenza vaccination.
Contraindications include:
- Anyone with a known allergy to the antibiotics - gentamicin, neomycin or polymyxin (some brands may be tolerated/able to be received as they don’t all contain these antibiotics)
- Anyone with a known allergy to other components of the vaccine: polysorbate 80, octoxinol 9 and formaldehyde (some brands may be tolerated/able to be received as they don’t all contain these compounds)
- Anyone with a severe allergy to eggs or chicken feathers (people who develop swelling the tongue, lips or develop respiratory distress or collapse when exposed to the above) Note that you may still be able to receive the influenza vaccine at your regular GP clinic.
- Anyone with a high fever at the time of immunisation.

If I am travelling overseas should I get this vaccination before I go?
Yes. Everyone travelling overseas should be vaccinated for influenza. You should ideally try to be vaccinated no later than 2 days before you are due to travel, in case you have any side-effects that require advice or treatment.

I am under 18. Can I still have the vaccination at a workplace flu vaccination clinic?
If you are 16 years of age or older you may be vaccinated in the workplace, provided you have a valid consent form signed by a parent or guardian. If you are aged 18 years or over you are able to sign the consent form yourself.

I have a Cold or have already had the Flu this year. Can I still have a flu vaccination?
If you have any current symptoms of a cold or flu or coronavirus (such as fever, cough, or sore throat), regardless of how mild they are, DO NOT come for your vaccination. Instead, you need to get tested for COVID-19 and stay home until your result is available and you are completely well.
If you are diagnosed with influenza this year, you can still receive a flu vaccination once you are completely recovered. Even if you have already had the flu, you will still benefit from the flu vaccine as it will protect you against other Influenza strains which may be different from the Influenza strain you were diagnosed with.

I am scared of having an injection but I want to be protected against the Flu. What do I do?
Tell the person who is coordinating the vaccinations that you are worried. They may be able to arrange for you to go first, since that may reduce anxiety, and allow you some privacy during the vaccination. You may also like to have a calm friend accompany you. Make sure that you are not hungry or thirsty before the vaccination, and that you have been to the toilet. If you have a phobia of needles, you can purchase anaesthetic patches from most pharmacies. These patches contain a local anaesthetic gel to numb the vaccination site prior to your vaccination. Ask your pharmacist whether these patches are suitable for you.
Apply a patch to the centre of your upper outer arm 2 hours prior to your vaccination appointment. The vaccinator will remove it for you prior to administering your vaccination.

Place anaesthetic patch on the area shown in the picture. Choose a site approximately 2cm below the ‘incorrect site’ as indicated.
Six common myths about the flu vaccine

The first myth is that “getting the flu isn’t a big deal”

The fact is that influenza is a serious disease that is much more severe than the common Cold. Influenza can cause significantly debilitating illness, and can even be fatal.

The second myth is that “I don’t need the vaccine again because I had it last year”

The fact is that you need to be vaccinated every year because the vaccine is updated annually according to current prevalent Influenza strains and immunity may start to decrease after 4 months.

The third myth is that “the flu vaccine makes you sick”

The fact is that while all vaccines have side-effects, the vaccine is safe and cannot give you the flu.

The fourth myth is that “the flu vaccine doesn’t work”

The fact is that the flu vaccine is the best immune-boosting protection we have against significant influenza infection.

The fifth myth is that “I don’t need the flu vaccine because I’m healthy”

The fact is that no one is flu-proof. No one has natural immunity against Influenza. Even healthy people can get the flu, and become very unwell, and can spread it to others.

The sixth myth is that “I don’t have time to get the flu vaccine”

The fact is that getting the vaccine takes just minutes out of your day and can save you a lot of time by avoiding work absenteeism.

Medications

I am on Antibiotics. Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

Yes, the vaccine does not interact with any antibiotics, so it is safe to have the vaccine while you are taking antibiotics.

I am on blood pressure / cholesterol-lowering tablets. Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

Yes, the vaccine does not interact with any of these, so it is safe to have the vaccine while you are taking these medications.

I am on blood thinning medication (Aspirin, Warfarin, Heparin, Pradaxa, Xarelto etc). Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

You may develop a superficial or deep bruise (haematoma) at the injection site. If you are on short-term treatment, you could delay the vaccination until you have finished taking these medications. If your dose of Warfarin is not stable, you should have your levels checked before having the vaccination. You should defer your vaccination if the INR is more than 3.0 (for Warfarin) at 4 hours after the dose. If you are unsure, we recommend you discuss this with your GP.

To reduce the risk of having a large bruise, we advise that you press firmly on the vaccination site for 5 minutes and avoid strenuous activity with that arm for 24 hours.

I have had a steroid injection into my joint. Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

Yes, the vaccine does not interact with this, so it is safe to have the vaccine while you are having these injections.

I am on steroids (e.g. Prednisone, Prednisolone) or other immunosuppressive medication (e.g. chemotherapy).

These medications reduce the body’s immune response to the influenza vaccine. Therefore, you may not be as protected from influenza than if you were not taking these medications. However, the protection you get from influenza vaccination is important, as you would be more susceptible to influenza infection without it. We recommend you discuss this with your doctor if you have further questions.

I am taking steroids for bodybuilding. Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

Yes. These steroids are different from those mentioned on the consent form, and are less likely to suppress the immune system.
I am having other vaccinations. Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

All other vaccinations can be given on the same day as your flu vaccination. Previously it was recommended to wait 7 days between your COVID vaccine and receiving any other vaccination however new evidence demonstrates the safety and immunogenicity of co-administration of COVID and flu vaccines. There is no need to wait for an interval between receiving your influenza vaccine and your COVID vaccine.

I am taking Methotrexate for an autoimmune condition, is this likely to cause any problem with the vaccine?

No. People taking methotrexate for conditions such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and other autoimmune conditions generally respond well to influenza vaccination, often achieving slightly lower but nevertheless protective antibody levels.

What other medications have possible interactions with Flu vaccine?

In general, flu vaccines are safe to take with other medications. However, after you have your Influenza vaccine, your usual dose of some medicines may be affected.

If you are on any of these medicines, please consult your GP, as they may wish to organise a blood test to check your medication levels within a few days of your flu vaccination:

- Carbamazepine (used in epilepsy)
- Phenobarbitone (used in epilepsy, anxiety, insomnia)
- Phenytoin (used in epilepsy)
- Warfarin (used to prevent blood clots)
- Theophylline (used for asthma).

Potential Side Effects

What are the possible side-effects?

Possible redness, soreness, itching, bruising or mild swelling at the injection site. This usually resolves within 1-2 days. Sometimes a tender lump (a lymph node) appears under the arm that may be present for several days. Occasionally a hard lump may develop at the injection site. This may persist for a week or more. It does not require treatment.

Occasionally people develop a mild fever within 1–2 days of the vaccination and occasionally muscle aches, headache, tiredness or a general feeling of being unwell. These symptoms are due to activation of the immune system. They are not attributable to influenza infection.

What can I do to treat the side-effects?

Fever and pain can be treated with Paracetamol, taken as directed on the packet.

Are there any more serious side-effects?

There have been inconclusive reports of serious neurological disorders in people who have previously suffered from a severe nervous system disorder ‘Guillain Barre Syndrome’. Those who have had Guillain Barre Syndrome should speak to their GP.

Does it reduce my natural immunity?

No. Vaccination does not reduce your natural immunity to infections - in fact, it boosts the impact of your own natural immunity.

Allergies

I am allergic to penicillin or sulfa antibiotics. Can I still have a Flu vaccination?

Yes, the vaccine does not contain any penicillin or sulfa antibiotics so it is safe to have the vaccine even if you are allergic to these antibiotics.

I am allergic to eggs. Can I still have a flu vaccination?

If you have egg allergy and have previously had a flu vaccination without an allergic reaction, you may receive the vaccination. However, if you have not previously had a vaccination with an egg-based vaccine (e.g., influenza or yellow
fever vaccine), we recommend you discuss this with your GP.

Cold or Flu

What is the difference between a Cold and the Flu?

If you have a Cold:
- You feel unwell for a few days before your symptoms appear
- You have a variety of fairly mild symptoms such as sore throat, runny nose, and cough
- Your temperature may be slightly elevated, making you feel hot or shivery or both
- Although you feel unwell, you can do most of your normal daily activities like, driving, and looking after children.

If you have flu:
- You can go from feeling perfectly well to unwell very suddenly
- Your symptoms are much more severe than those of a Cold
- You may have a blocked or runny nose, a sore throat and a cough
- Your temperature is elevated, you have chills, shivers, and your muscles and joints ache
- You feel exhausted and extremely unwell, you are unable to carry out basic daily tasks and will probably have to go to bed
- You may need someone to look after you.

Other

When should vaccination be carried out?

Vaccination is best carried out during March-June each year, before the onset of the peak season for flu (July – September).

In 2022, Australia’s influenza infections peaked in late May and early June, rather than in August. Based on patterns currently observed in the Northern hemisphere, it’s expected that Australia may experience another early flu season in 2023.

What if I am pregnant or am breastfeeding?

Influenza vaccine may be administered during all stages of pregnancy, including during the first trimester. The medical profession and governments worldwide have identified pregnant women as a high priority group for receiving an influenza vaccination.

This is based on:
- Evidence that the vaccine is safe for both the pregnant woman and her baby
- Evidence that the vaccine reduces the risk of illness and hospitalisation due to influenza and pneumonia in vaccinated pregnant women
- Evidence that vaccinating pregnant women extends protection against influenza and pneumonia to the baby, which continues until the child is 6 months of age through passive transfer of immunity (via the placenta, and then via breast milk)
- Evidence that it reduces the incidence of stillbirth and premature birth.

How long after the vaccination should I avoid drinking alcohol?

It is considered sensible to avoid alcohol for several hours after having the flu vaccination, but this is not an absolute rule. If you feel that you must drink alcohol, you should drink in moderation.

How long do I have to wait before I can donate blood?

You can donate blood immediately after you have a flu vaccination. You can also have the flu vaccination immediately after you donate blood.
When can I drive after having the vaccination?
It is fine to drive a motor vehicle (or handle heavy machinery) after the flu vaccination if:
- It has been more than 15 minutes since you had the flu vaccination
- You feel well and able to do so.

When can I exercise after having the vaccine? It is fine to exercise after having the vaccine if:
- It has been more than 15 minutes since you had the flu vaccination
- You feel well and able to do so
- You are not at risk of developing a haematoma (e.g. on anticoagulants/blood thinning medication) and should therefore avoid heavy lifting with the injected arm.

When can an Air Traffic Controller or pilot return to work after having the Flu vaccination?
CASA Medical Certificate holders must have 24 hours off work post-vaccination. Aviation related duties should not be undertaken for 24 hours after receiving a vaccination/immunisation.

It is recommended that you check the CASA requirements which can be found here.

I am prone to keloid scarring of my skin. Will the vaccination cause keloid scarring?
Keloid scarring can occur with vaccines or other minimal trauma. We suggest that you discuss this possibility with your own GP prior to vaccination. As a minimum, we suggest applying an ice pack after vaccination to minimize inflammation, so you should bring a frozen ice pack with you.

Is the vaccine tested on animals?
The vaccines are not tested on animals each year. However, from time to time, animals are given the flu vaccine as part of a testing process, especially when new vaccines are developed. This occurred most recently during the pandemic influenza vaccine rapid development during 2009.

What else can I do to avoid getting or spreading viral infections?
- Stay home from work and all other usual activities when you are feeling unwell with cold/flu symptoms;
- Maintain a social distance of 1.5m from others when in public spaces;
- Wear a face mask in spaces where you can’t maintain physical distancing from others;
- Observe cough etiquette - Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and dispose of the tissue in a rubbish bin after you use it;
- Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly, especially after you cough or sneeze;
- Don’t share eating and drinking utensils or share food and drinks;
- Regularly clean surfaces such as desks, taps and fridge doors as viruses can live on these kinds of surfaces for several hours;
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth as germs are commonly spread this way;
- Boost your immune system with a balanced diet, exercise and rest and try to reduce stress.

Consumer Medicine Information
Click here for Consumer Medicine Information for the flu vaccine brands that Medimobile uses.

References linked here

For more information download the Medimobile App and visit Flu Prevention Tips.

If you have any concerns or questions, please call one of our in-house doctors on 1300 660 339 during office hours or contact us through the Medimobile App.