Flu Vaccination Frequently Asked Questions

Immunisation and the Flu

**What is immunisation?**
Immunisation uses the body’s natural defense 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 itself.

**What is Influenza? The ‘Flu’**
- A highly contagious viral illness caused by the Influenza virus
- Is much more severe than the common Cold
- Symptoms include: rapid onset of fever, muscle aches, joint pains, headache, sore throat and cough
- Lasts up to 14 days
- Can be followed by a secondary illness e.g. pneumonia
- Peak infection frequency is 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 Cold, which is a short-term, mild illness. Although the symptoms of a Cold cause inconvenience, they rarely causes significant debility. The ‘Cold’ is caused by a range of different viruses, but these viruses are different to the Influenza virus.

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, in high-risk individuals e.g. the elderly, those with chronic illnesses or impaired immune systems. A flu outbreak occurs most years, but every 10 years or so, 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 developed another concomitant viral illness.

**How effective is the Influenza vaccine?**
Influenza vaccination prevents up to 70% of cases of Influenza infection in healthy adults.

**Who should be vaccinated?**
- Those who wish to reduce their likelihood of becoming ill with influenza
- Women who are pregnant (during all stages of pregnancy, including the 1st trimester), or planning to become pregnant, or who are breastfeeding.
- Those over 65 years of age
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years or older
- Those with chronic diseases at any age (especially those with chronic heart, lung, kidney and metabolic disorders e.g. diabetes)
- Those who are obese (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²)

To calculate your 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.

Your BMI (Body Mass Index):

- **underweight**: < 18.5;
- **normal weight**: 18.5-24.9;
- **overweight**: 25-29.9;
- **obese**: ≥ 30
● Those receiving immunosuppressive therapy
● Those who could transmit Influenza to persons at increased risk e.g. people in contact with young children, including parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles
● All health care workers

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 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 wane 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. 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 2017 vaccine protect me against?
The 2017 Quadrivalent vaccine (QIV) protects against the 4 mostly likely flu strains to circulate in the Southern Hemisphere in 2017:

A/Michigan/45/2015 (H1N1)pdm09-like virus
A/Hong Kong/4801/2014 (H3N2)-like virus
B/Brisbane/60/2008-like virus
B/Phuket/3073/2013-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 vaccination 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 antibiotic - gentamicin, neomycin or polymyxin
● Anyone with a known allergy to other components of the vaccine: polysorbate 80, octoxinol 9 and formaldehyde.
● 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)
● Anyone with a high fever at the time of immunisation

After you have your Influenza vaccine, your usual dose of some medicines may be affected. These medicines include:

● Carbamazepine i.e. Tegretol (used in epilepsy or convulsions)
● Phenobarbital (used in epilepsy, or convulsions, anxiety, insomnia)
● Phenytoin i.e. Dilantin (used in epilepsy or convulsions)
● Warfarin (used to prevent blood clots)
● Theophylline (used for asthma).

If you are on any of these medicines, please consult your GP to see if they wish to organise a blood test within a few days of your vaccination to check your levels of medication.
If I am travelling overseas should I get this vaccination before I go?
Yes. Everyone travelling overseas should be vaccinated with the Influenza Immunisation. 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?
Due to the approval profile of the Quadrivalent Flu Vaccines this year all participants in workplace vaccination programs must be aged 18 years or over.
Participants aged 17 or under should see their own doctor for advice about flu vaccination.

What is the youngest age accepted at a pharmacy or public flu vaccination clinic?
All patients must be over 12 years of age to receive the vaccine in-pharmacy. If you are between the age of 12 – 15 years, you may have the vaccination in pharmacy, provided your parent or guardian signs your consent form. Following common law guidelines, if you are 16 years or over you can consent to have the vaccination without your parents’ or guardians’ consent.
Due to the approval profile of one brand of the Quadrivalent Flu Vaccine this year if you are between the ages of 12 and 17 you must check with the pharmacy regarding the correct flu vaccine.

I have a Cold or have already had the flu this year. Can I still have a flu vaccination?
Usually we only delay the vaccination if your temperature is high e.g. over 38.5 degrees Celsius. With a temperature this high, you would usually be too unwell to be at work. If you have a mild Cold, or have had it for more than 2 days, you probably do not have a high temperature and can have the vaccination. Even if you have already had the flu this year, you will still benefit from the vaccine as it will protect you against other Influenza strains.

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 reduces anxiety, and have 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 center of your upper outer arm 2 hours prior to your vaccination appointment. The vaccinator will remove it for you prior to administering your vaccination.
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 strains.

The third myth is that “the flu vaccine makes you sick”
The fact is that while all vaccines have side-effects, the vaccine is considered to be 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 them.

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 or low molecular weight heparin (LMWH) 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) or the anti-Xa level is more than 0.5 Units/ml 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, as this type of steroids is different from those mentioned on the consent form, and do not cause suppression of the immune system.

I am having other vaccinations. Can I still have a flu vaccination?
Yes, because this vaccination can be given with other vaccines on the same day.

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 in comparison with other people.

What other medications have possible interactions with flu vaccine?
There are only 7 medications that are known to have possible interactions with flu vaccines. They are: Oral Prednisone, Cyclosporin, Warfarin, Carbamazepine, Phenytoin, Phenobarbitone and Theophylline.

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 under the arm appears (a lymph node) 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 likely not attributable to the flu vaccine, and more likely attributable to another intercurrent viral 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 (influenza, measles-mumps-rubella, 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, blocked 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 going to work, driving, shopping, cooking and looking after children

If you have flu:
● You can go from feeling perfectly well to unwell very suddenly
● Your symptoms are 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-May each year, before the onset of the peak season for flu (July – September).

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 world-wide have identified pregnant women as a high priority group for receiving an influenza vaccination. This is based on:
a) good evidence that the vaccine is safe for both the pregnant woman and her baby
b) good evidence to show that the vaccine reduces the risk of illness and hospitalisation due to influenza and pneumonia in vaccinated pregnant women
c) the process of vaccinating pregnant women extends protection against influenza and pneumonia to her baby, which continues until the child is 6 months of age through passive transfer of immunity (via the placenta, and via breast milk)
d) There is 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 are able to 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:
(a) It has been more than 15 minutes since you had the flu vaccination
(b) 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:
(a) It has been more than 15 minutes since you had the flu vaccination
(b) You feel well and able to do so
(c) You are not at risk of developing a haematoma (e.g. on anticoagulants/blood thinning medication)

When can an Air Traffic Controller or pilot return to work after having the flu vaccination?
CASA Medical Holders must have 12 hours off work post-vaccination.

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 the flu or a Cold?
● 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 flu viruses can live on these kinds of surfaces for a number of 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.

For more information download FluApp 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 contact us through FluApp or talk to your doctor.