

Flu fact sheet

What is flu?

Flu is a virus that causes an infection of the respiratory system (nose, throat and lungs).

There are other viruses that also affect the respiratory system and are common over colder months. These cause the “common cold”, which is a different illness to flu.

What are the symptoms?

Flu symptoms often start with fever, muscle aches and fatigue, together with symptoms such as running nose, cough and sore throat.

Complications of the flu, such as pneumonia, can be life threatening particularly for older people or those with certain medical conditions.

If there are no complications, people will usually improve over one week, although the illness may persist for longer.

How is it spread?

The flu virus spreads easily when infected people cough or sneeze without covering their mouths and noses.

It can also be passed on through contact with contaminated surfaces. The flu virus can live for up to five minutes on hands and up to a day on hard surfaces. The flu virus enters the body through the nose or throat.

It then takes between one and four days for the person to start feeling unwell.

People can pass on the virus from a day before symptoms start and commonly up to seven days after symptoms start. Children and people with impaired immunity can pass on the virus for longer.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor can diagnose flu based on your symptoms. To confirm the diagnosis, sometimes they will test for the virus with a sample taken from the nose or throat.

How is it treated?

- Rest and make sure you drink and eat enough.
- Paracetamol can help lower your fever and relieve headache and muscle aches. Follow the instructions carefully on how much to take.
- See your doctor if you are concerned that your symptoms are getting worse.
- Your doctor may choose to prescribe antiviral medication. These are only used in certain circumstances and your doctor will decide when they should be used.

How is it prevented?

There are several ways to reduce your chances of catching flu:

- Get the flu vaccine every year helps to protect yourself from seasonal flu
- This will also help protect your family, friends and colleagues
- Wash your hands often to get rid of the germs you may have picked up. Use soap and water, or an alcohol based hand rub.

If you get sick - don't share it!

- When you cough or sneeze cover your mouth with your elbow (rather than your hand).
- Stay home from work and let someone know you are sick. If your child is unwell keep them at home from childcare or school.
- Avoid visiting people who are likely to get really unwell from flu, including infants and young children, pregnant women, those with medical problems and the elderly.
- Avoid visiting family or friends in hospital or aged-care homes.
- Stay at least one metre away from other people especially when coughing.
- Call ahead if you need to see a doctor. This will allow the medical service to plan your visit to prevent infection spreading to others.

Who should get vaccinated?

All Tasmanians should consider protecting themselves, their family and their community from flu by being vaccinated. You need flu vaccine every year to help stay protected.

The flu season usually occurs each year in Tasmania sometime between July and October. It is best to be vaccinated before the flu season commences. Being vaccinated from late April helps protect you in time for the peak flu period.

The following people are eligible for a free flu vaccine because they are at greater risk of getting severe flu and complications:

- All children aged from six months to under five years.
- All adults aged 65 years and over.
- Pregnant women at any stage in their pregnancy.

- Adults and children aged from 6 months of with chronic medical conditions such as heart, lung, liver or kidney diseases, asthma, diabetes, cancer, impaired immunity and neuromuscular conditions.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over.

Free vaccine is available for these people through General Practitioners. A consultation fee may apply.

Healthcare workers, child care workers and other people who live or work with vulnerable people should also get vaccinated to protect themselves, and the vulnerable people they are in contact with.

Tasmanians who are not eligible for a free flu vaccine can purchase a flu vaccine from their GP or some pharmacies.

Are there any side effects associated with the flu vaccine?

Common side effects of the flu vaccination include pain and swelling at the injection site. Fever is less common. These side effects are usually mild and resolve quickly without any treatment.

The flu vaccine cannot give you the flu.

If you have any concerns or queries about the flu vaccine, please discuss with your General Practitioner.

For more information

- Speak to your doctor or clinic nurse
- See the DHHS flu website www.flu.tas.gov.au
- Call the Public Health Hotline - Tasmania on **1800 671 738**
- Call Immunise Australia on 1800 671 811 or go to www.immunise.health.gov.au

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