

Flu Vaccination Frequently Asked Questions

About the Vaccine

What is immunisation?

Immunisation uses 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 contract the virus itself.

What is Influenza? “The Flu”

- A highly infectious viral illness
- Caused by the Influenza virus
- Tends to be much more severe than the common cold
- Symptoms include rapid onset of fever, muscle aches, joint pains, headache, sore throat, cough, and a generalized feeling of being unwell
- Lasts up to 10 days
- Can be followed by a secondary illness e.g. pneumonia
- Peak time is 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” but usually, this is not the case. They usually have a common cold, which is a short-term, mild illness which, although inconvenient, rarely causes significant debility. The “cold” is caused by a range of viruses, which are different from the Influenza virus.

The sufferer of influenza is often so unwell that they are confined to bed. It can last up to 10 days and can be complicated by a range of secondary problems including pneumonia and even death in high-risk individuals e.g. the elderly or those with chronic illnesses. A flu outbreak occurs most years, but every 10 years or so, a major epidemic occurs in which larger numbers of the population are infected.

The strains in this year's vaccine are:

- A/Brisbane/02/2018 (H1N1) pdm09-like virus
- A/South Australia/34/2019 (H3N2)-like virus
- B/Washington/02/2019-like (B/Victoria lineage) virus
- B/Phuket/3073/2013-like (B/Yamagata lineage) virus

Can I get the flu from the vaccination?

No. The vaccine contains only inactivated virus particles (a virus that has been concentrated, killed then broken apart) and is therefore incapable of causing Influenza infection.

People who have developed a runny nose or sore throat after vaccination have usually developed another viral illness.

How effective is the Influenza vaccine?

Influenza vaccination prevents 50-70% 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 (including the 1st trimester) or planning to become pregnant or who are breastfeeding
- Those over 65 years of age – If over 65 years of age it is recommended that you receive an “enhanced” Quadrivalent vaccine over the Standard Quadrivalent Vaccination
 - The ‘enhanced’ influenza vaccine for 2020 Flud Quad is available for people aged ≥65 years. It is specifically designed to increase the immune system’s response to the vaccine for people ≥65 years.
 - Eligible patients can access Flud Quad vaccination through the National Immunisation Program (NIP) from their GP or in selected pharmacies throughout Victoria and Western Australia. This is expected to start April 2020
- Standard dose quadrivalent influenza immunisation is still safe for patients over 65 and may be recommended in special circumstances.
- Please consult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or older
- Those with chronic, debilitating diseases (especially those with chronic heart, lung, kidney and metabolic disorders e.g. diabetes)
- Those who are significantly 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 immune suppressive therapy
- Those who can transmit Influenza to persons at increased risk e.g. parents of young children and health care professionals

How often is flu vaccination required?

Every Flu Season. In certain circumstances there may be benefit for you to receive a second flu vaccination late in the season, particularly for pregnant women and those travelling to the northern hemisphere. Please consult your pharmacist or Immunisation provider

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, the average person is considered “covered” after 10-14 days after immunisation. Your antibodies will peak at around 4-6 weeks – with maximum protection occurring 3-6 months after immunisation. Your antibodies will gradually fall but you will retain some level of protection for around 1 year

Why do I need to be vaccinated every year?

The Influenza virus strains change each year, so the vaccine is changed accordingly. The World Health Organization predicts the 4 most expected strains and the vaccine manufacturers are all required to formulate their vaccines to cover these 4 strains.

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 may 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 few contraindications to Influenza vaccination:

- Anyone with a known allergy to the antibiotics: 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 respiration distress or collapse when exposed to the above)
- Anyone with a present high fever

After you have your Influenza vaccine, your usual blood levels of some medicines may be affected.

These medicines include:

- * Carbamazepine e.g. Tegretol (used in epilepsy or convulsions)
- * Phenobarbitone (used in epilepsy, or convulsions, anxiety, insomnia)
- * Phenytoin e.g. 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 pharmacist and your doctor ASAP 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. Anyone travelling overseas should get vaccinated. 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 and at least 2 weeks before to ensure you are covered.

If I am travelling to the Northern Hemisphere during influenza season (October - May), should I have another flu vaccination?

Australians travelling during the Northern Hemisphere influenza season are strongly recommended to receive influenza vaccine when travelling to regions where influenza is circulating or in settings with increased risk of influenza circulation such as large tourist groups, cruises or mass gatherings.

Those who have received a current Southern Hemisphere influenza vaccine and are travelling later in the year to the Northern Hemisphere may receive a second dose of influenza vaccine within the same year. Although the current formulation for use in the Northern Hemisphere may be preferred, it is generally not available in Australia. Receiving a dose of the Southern Hemisphere formulation for this purpose is acceptable.

What is the youngest age accepted at a pharmacy or public flu vaccination clinic?

All patients must be over 16 years of age in all states excluding Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia where the minimum age is 10. Below this age, you can still receive a flu vaccination via other immunisers such as nurse, doctor or aboriginal health worker.

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 and would feel quite hot. 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 2 other flu 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.

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 pharmacist and doctor.

To reduce the risk of having a 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 this would be important, as you would be more susceptible to influenza infection without it. We recommend you discuss this with your pharmacist and 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.

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 quite 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 some medications that are known to have possible interactions with flu vaccines. They are: Oral Prednisone, Cyclosporin, Warfarin, Carbamazepine, Phenytoin, Phenobarbitone and Theophylline. In most cases it's still very safe to get the flu vaccine however it's recommended to discuss with your pharmacist and doctor.

Potential Side Effects

What are the possible side-effects?

Possible redness, soreness, itching, bruising or mild swelling at the injection site. This usually clears 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. This usually lasts no more than 1-2 days. Allergic reaction in those allergic to vaccine components.

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 the severe nervous system disorder "Guillain Barre Syndrome". Those who have had Guillain Barre Syndrome should speak to their doctor.

Does it reduce my natural immunity?

No. Vaccination does not reduce your natural immunity to infections - it acts as a "booster" to the immune system.

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 can have 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 pharmacists and doctor first.

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
- You probably have a blocked or runny nose, a sore throat, and maybe even a mild cough
- Your temperature may be a little high, 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 generally more severe than with a cold
- You may or may not have a blocked or runny nose or a sore throat
- Your temperature is high, you have chills, shivers, and your muscles and joints ache
- You feel exhausted, 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?

The vaccine is safe to be given during all stages of pregnancy and breast feeding. If you are concerned, please discuss this with your Pharmacist, Obstetrician or doctor. Women who fall pregnant in the second half of the year should have the flu vaccination.

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 the unborn child
- 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 the unborn/newborn child which continues until the child is 6 months of age
- d) there is evidence that it reduces the incidence of stillbirth and premature birth. The vaccine may be administered during all stages of pregnancy, including the first trimester.

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 won 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 such as the pandemic influenza vaccine of 2009 and any new technologies in vaccines such as the research being conducted on universal flu vaccines.

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.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow
- 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.

If you have any concerns or questions, please speak to your local pharmacist or general practitioner.

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 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 flu vaccine is considered to be safe, is an inactivated version of the virus and cannot give you the flu.

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

The fact is that it’s the best immune-boosting protection we can get against the worst flu strains – the kind that can knock you out for days.

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. Even healthy people can get the flu and 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 time spent out of action.