

Flu (influenza)

Influenza, or the flu, is a viral infection that affects the respiratory system. Symptoms include fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and pains, a head cold and a mild sore throat. It can often cause a severe cough. The infected person usually recovers within a week. Children aged under 5 are at higher risk of developing serious complications from the flu, such as pneumonia.

How it spreads

Flu is highly infectious. Flu spreads by droplets in the air that contain the virus or direct contact with mucus or saliva. People get infected by:

- breathing in droplets when an infected person breathes, coughs or sneezes on them
- touching a surface contaminated with droplets – for example, hands, tissues, toys or eating utensils – and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

Annual flu vaccinations are available under the Australian National Immunisation Program and are free for eligible people most at risk, including children aged under 5 years.

Exclusion period

If a person has respiratory symptoms (cough, sneezing, runny or blocked nose, sore throat), exclude them only if:

- the respiratory symptoms are severe, **or**
- the respiratory symptoms are getting worse (more frequent or severe), **or**
- they also have concerning symptoms (fever, rash, tiredness, pain, poor feeding).

Otherwise do not exclude.

A person often has an ongoing cough after they have recovered from a respiratory infection. If their other symptoms have gone and they feel well, they can return to the service.

Risks in pregnancy

If you are pregnant, you have a higher risk of developing serious complications from the flu. The flu can also be dangerous for the developing baby, as it increases the risk of low birthweight and complications. You can protect yourself by getting a flu vaccination, having good hand and respiratory hygiene, and wearing a mask if you wish.

Actions for educators and other staff

Follow the exclusion period in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Ensure staff and children have good respiratory and hand hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Encourage annual flu vaccination for staff. Remind parents and carers about annual flu vaccinations.

If you have several cases of flu-like illness in your service, contact your public health unit for advice.

Actions for parents and carers

Keep your child at home until their symptoms have gone and they feel well. If your child still has a cough, but their other symptoms have gone and they feel well, they can return to the service.

Teach your child to cough or sneeze into a tissue, then throw the tissue into a bin and wash their hands. If there are no tissues nearby, teach them to cough or sneeze into their inner elbow instead of their hands.

Encourage your child to wash their hands regularly.

Consider annual flu vaccinations for the whole family.

More information about the flu

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of the flu (healthdirect.gov.au/flu).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker (healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker)
- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.