

Flu vaccine; who really needs it?

Each year in Australia, influenza causes an estimated 3,000 deaths in older people. There are also the economic costs to the community of more than one and a half million lost work days, 300,000 doctor visits and 18,000 people admitted to hospital.

However, it's not just older people who are affected by the flu. The fact is, rates of flu infection are highest among young children; although children under the age of five are less likely to show typical symptoms of the flu – the fever and the cough – so you may not know that your child has actually contracted the infection.

Most children cope pretty well with the flu but young children are especially vulnerable to new strains of the flu such as the “swine flu” which was first identified in 2009. Their underdeveloped immune systems can't manage the invading virus.

So the flu virus picks its victims, singling out those people least able to resist the adverse effects. The greatest concern for doctors and patients alike is the danger, not just of the flu itself, but of severe complications such as pneumonia and the effect of influenza on existing medical conditions.

People with chronic heart, kidney or lung disease, diabetes or other long-term illnesses are particularly at risk. The stress caused by influenza can worsen these conditions and even cause premature death.

Today, prevention is our major weapon against influenza. You can help protect yourself by making sure your lifestyle is healthy with regular exercise you enjoy and a daily diet that includes the widest possible variety of foods. And, of course, annual vaccination against the flu is recommended for all people in high risk categories.

Everyone 65 years or older should have the flu vaccine. As well, at any age, you should be vaccinated if you have an ongoing illness such as diabetes, kidney disease, asthma, heart or circulation problems, or compromised immunity as a result of HIV, cancer or longer-term steroid use.

Now there is also a special effort to ensure people who might spread the infection to the above groups are vaccinated. This includes health workers – doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, carers and even children. There is mounting evidence that widespread vaccination of children against influenza slashes infection rates in both children and the more vulnerable elderly. This year, once again, only certain brands of flu vaccine are recommended for children under 10 years of age (following evidence of some adverse effects in young children a couple of years ago with a particular brand of vaccine). Your doctor or pharmacist can give you more details.

The formulation of influenza vaccine for use in Australia is determined by the Australian Influenza Vaccine Committee based on information and recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO). The composition of the 2013 vaccine includes killed strains of the viruses first identified in Wisconsin in 2010 and in Victoria in 2011 as well as the so-called H₁N₁ swine flu.

As in previous years, the Australian Government will provide flu vaccine free of charge to everyone 65 years plus; and those people qualifying for the “free allocation” also include pregnant women, indigenous people 15 years and over, all residents of nursing homes and long care facilities and anyone six months of age and over with a condition “pre-disposing to severe influenza illness” – such as heart or lung diseases.

You can get more advice about whether the flu vaccine is right for you from pharmacies around Australia providing the Self Care health information. Phone the Pharmaceutical Society (PSA) on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location, or visit the website at www.psa.org.au and click on "Self Care" then "Find a Self Care Pharmacy".