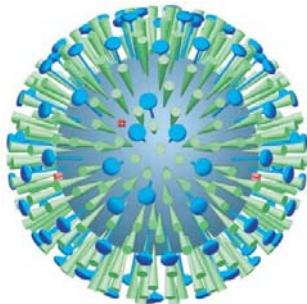




**Public Health  
England**

Information Leaflet  
***Seasonal Influenza***  
Winter 2015/16



Further information can be obtained from  
West Midlands North Health Protection Unit  
Public Health England  
Stonefield House  
St Georges Hospital  
Corporation Street  
Stafford ST16 3SR  
0344 225 3560 op2 op2

## **What is influenza?**

Influenza or 'flu' is a viral infection that mainly affects the nose, throat and the lungs. There are two main types of flu that cause infection; influenza A and influenza B. Influenza A makes up most of our normal seasonal flu. Influenza B is often milder and tends to occur most often in children. Usually what people call "gastric flu" is a gastrointestinal infection (diarrhoea and/or vomiting) with another virus - usually norovirus or rotavirus.

## **Who catches influenza?**

Anyone can catch flu; the highest rates of infection are usually in school age children. Most influenza infections occur during the winter months. The amount of illness occurring each year varies, depending on the particular strain that is circulating. Some influenza viruses cause more severe illness than others. Hence in some winters people may be more unwell with flu than in other years. These flu strains then become just part of the normal flu season.

## **How do you catch influenza?**

Influenza is mostly caught by breathing in air containing the virus when an infected person coughs/sneezes or by touching a surface where the virus has landed and then touching your mouth or nose.

## **How infectious is influenza?**

Influenza is highly infectious and can spread rapidly from person to person.

## **What is influenza like?**

Influenza is worse than an ordinary cold. It usually starts suddenly with a high fever over 38.0°C which can last for 3-4 days. A dry cough, headaches and chills are common as are general muscle aches and pains. A stuffy nose, sneezing and a sore throat can also be present. The fever tends to decrease after the second day when a stuffy nose and a sore throat become more noticeable. Some children may also feel sick (nausea), or have diarrhoea even when bet-

ter. Tiredness can last 2-3 weeks.

### **How serious is influenza?**

Most people recover completely from influenza in a matter of days or a week. For others, for example older people, pregnant women, those with underlying health conditions (such as chest or heart disease, or diabetes) and new-born babies, influenza can be a serious illness.

Serious illness from influenza can be caused either by the virus itself causing a severe viral pneumonia or bacterial infection causing bronchitis and pneumonia or to a worsening of any underlying chronic medical condition such as heart disease.

### **Can you prevent influenza?**

Vaccine is available to protect against flu. Each year a new vaccine has to be produced to protect against the flu viruses expected to be in circulation that winter and to boost the immune response.

The vaccine is very safe and side effects are uncommon and usually mild. The vaccine is given in the autumn before the flu season begins. It is not recommended for everyone, but it is advisable for those likely to be more seriously affected by influenza. This includes:

- People of any age with chronic heart, lung, metabolic disorders (including severe asthma and diabetes), kidney problems or a lowered immune system due to treatment or disease.
- Pregnant women.
- Everyone aged 65 years and over.
- Those in long stay residential care accommodation where influenza, once introduced, may spread rapidly.

Children aged two to four years of age as well as those in school Years 1 and 2 are also being offered the flu vaccination this season.

Fit adults under the age of 65 years who are not in one of the groups mentioned above are not offered the vaccine as part of the national programme.

It is also recommended that immunisations be offered to health and social care workers involved in the direct care of and/or support to patients and also anyone caring for a person in the at risk groups.

### **How can you reduce the spread of influenza?**

- Keep people that are ill away from school/work - they should remain off until they are symptom free.
- Avoid touching surfaces (such as door handles) and then the face
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and dispose of used/dirty tissues in a bin - "Catch it, Bin it, Kill it"
- Wash hands frequently with soap and water and dry thoroughly.

### **When can a person go back at school/work after influenza?**

Influenza is most infectious when symptoms start until about 3-5 days later. A person should return once they are well enough which is usually 5-7 days after they developed symptoms.

### **How can you treat someone with influenza?**

- Most people with the flu need no special treatment. Influenza is caused by a virus so antibiotics do not help unless there is a complication. Occasionally a special 'antiviral' medicine is given to people in the at risk groups or whose illness is getting worse.
- Someone who is ill with flu should keep warm, rest and drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration.
- Paracetamol can be given to reduce the fever; aspirin must NOT be given to children under 16 years of age as it has been associated with the development of a severe neurological disorder called Reye's syndrome.
- It is best to stay at home while feeling ill with influenza as this reduces the chance of spreading the infection to others.