

Influenza

A patient's guide

What is influenza?

Influenza or 'flu is a viral infection that mainly affects the nose, throat and lungs.

There are two main types of 'flu that cause infection: influenza A and influenza B. Influenza A is usually a more severe infection than influenza B.

Influenza usually starts suddenly with a high fever over 38.0°C (100°F) which can last for three to four 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 people may also feel sick (nausea), or have diarrhoea. Tiredness can last two to three weeks.

Influenza is worse than an ordinary cold. A cold is often limited to a runny nose, sneezing, watery eyes and throat irritation and the symptoms usually occur gradually and do not cause a fever or body aches.

A gastrointestinal infection (gastric 'flu) is caused by 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 severity of illness occurring each year varies, depending on the particular strain that is circulating. Some influenza viruses cause more severe illness than others. Therefore in some winters people may feel more unwell with 'flu than in other years.

Pandemics of influenza (world-wide outbreaks) occur from time to time and the impact of these can vary enormously. The most recent pandemic caused by H1N1 2009 was relatively mild; however, there was a severe pandemic in 1918-19.

How do you catch influenza?

For the most part, influenza is caught by breathing in air containing the virus after an infected person coughs or sneezes, or by touching a surface where the virus has landed and then touching your mouth or nose.

How infectious is influenza?

Influenza is very infectious and can spread rapidly from person to person. Some strains of the virus are more infectious than others and some can cause more severe illness.

How serious is influenza?

Most people recover completely from influenza in a matter of days or a week. For other groups, e.g. older people, pregnant women, those with other illnesses (such as chest or heart disease, or diabetes) and newborn babies, influenza can be a serious illness.

Serious illness from influenza is very rare. It can be caused either by the virus itself causing a severe viral pneumonia (inflammation of the lungs, usually caused by an infection), or by triggering a bacterial

infection causing bronchitis and pneumonia, or a worsening of any underlying chronic medical condition such as heart disease.

It is important to remember that this does not always happen, but medical advice must be sought if your symptoms worsen and you are in the above group of patients.

How can you treat someone with influenza?

Most people with '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' (see below) or those 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.

It is best to stay at home while feeling ill with influenza as this reduces the chance of spreading the infection to

others. Advice can be sought from NHS Direct telephone lines if required. However it is important to contact your GP if you have an underlying health condition and are worried about your symptoms.

What information is available about the vaccine?

A 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 way the body deals with infection).

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 (so called 'at risk' groups).

These include:

- People of any age with chronic heart, lung, neurological, 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.

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

Children and 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.

How can you reduce the risk of influenza transmission in hospitals?

Patients with influenza should be isolated in a single room.

General advice:

- Wash hands frequently and carefully with soap and water and dry thoroughly.

- Avoid touching surfaces (such as door handles) and then the face.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a single-use tissue when coughing or sneezing and dispose of used or dirty tissues in a bin - 'Catch it, Bin it, Kill it' and then wash and dry your hands thoroughly.

For prospective patients:

- If you are due to attend an out-patient appointment and have 'flu-like symptoms, please contact the relevant out-patients department to discuss the possibility of re-scheduling your appointment.
- If you are due to attend for surgery and have 'flu-like symptoms, please contact the relevant department or team.
- Usually patients who are in the 'at risk' groups are contacted by their GP to ensure that their annual vaccination has been given (often in October). If you think you should have been vaccinated and have not been, but you are due for admission to the hospital, please contact your GP

surgery in good time before admission to receive the vaccine. Being on the waiting list for surgery is not a contra-indication for having the vaccine, but it is advisable that the vaccine is given at least two weeks prior to major surgery.

For visitors:

- People should not visit if they have had 'flu-like symptoms in the previous 72 hours.
- Children should not visit patients with suspected 'flu and the number of visitors should be limited to essential people only.
- Visitors will be required to wear some protective clothing (this will be explained by the ward staff), and should avoid going into the room while certain procedures are being carried out.

For staff:

- Staff should remain off work until they are symptom-free or deemed to be no longer infectious.

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