

Influenza

What is the flu?

The flu is an infection that is highly contagious and can cause fever, cough, body aches and other symptoms. The most common type of flu is the 'seasonal' flu. There are different forms of seasonal flu, for example, type A and type B. The flu season in Australia is during winter, commonly from May to September.

All forms of the flu are caused by viruses. The medical term for the flu is 'influenza'.

What are the other types of flu?

Besides seasonal flu, there is also the 'swine' flu, which caused a worldwide outbreak (a 'pandemic') in 2009 and 2010, and the bird flu. Bird flu (also known as 'avian' flu) is a severe form of the flu that is caused by a type of flu virus that first infected birds.

What are the most common flu symptoms?

All forms of the flu can cause:

- Fever (temperature higher than 38°C)
- Extreme tiredness
- Headache and body aches
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny nose

Flu symptoms can come on very suddenly.

Is the flu dangerous?

It can be. Most people get over the flu on their own, without any lasting problems. But some people need to go to hospital because of the flu and some people even die from it. This is because the flu can cause a serious lung infection called pneumonia. That's why it's important to keep from getting the flu in the first place.

People at higher risk of getting very sick from the flu include:

- People 65 years or older
- Very young children
- Pregnant women (see over the page for more information)
- People with certain other medical problems including heart disease and lung disease, as well as other chronic health problems

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Is there a test for the flu?

Yes. There are tests for the flu. In most cases, your doctor can tell if you have the flu by your symptoms. But in some cases, for example, if you are at risk for having other problems caused by the flu, your doctor might do a test for the flu.

How do people catch the flu?

The flu is spread easily from person to person by coughing, sneezing and touching surfaces.

How can I protect myself from the flu?

You can:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use alcohol hand rub
- Stay away from people you know are very sick
- Get the flu vaccine every year. Some years the flu vaccine is more effective than others. But even in years when it is less effective, it still helps prevent some cases. It can also help keep you from getting severely ill if you do get the flu.

What should I do if I get the flu?

If you think you have the flu you should stay home from work, school or other populated areas until you are feeling better. You are usually infectious to others for about five days after the illness starts, although children can remain infectious for about two weeks. You should rest and drink plenty of fluids. You can also take paracetamol (Panadol®) or a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory like ibuprofen (Nurofen®) to relieve fever and aches.

Infection control measures at home may reduce the risk of you passing the infection on to other family members and friends. You should wash your hands often, especially after coughing or sneezing. A facemask may help prevent household transmission. Also, always cover your mouth and nose with the inside of your elbow when you cough or sneeze.

Cough medications can be used if your cough is bothering you, but are not usually particularly helpful and they do have potential side effects. The cough associated with the flu goes away by itself in most cases.

Most people with the flu get better on their own within one to two weeks. But you should seek further medical care if you:

- Have trouble breathing or are short of breath

PATIENT INFORMATION

- Feel pain or pressure in your chest or belly
- Get suddenly dizzy
- Feel confused
- Have severe vomiting

Take your child to the doctor if he or she:

- Starts breathing fast or has trouble breathing
- Starts to turn purple or blue
- Is not drinking enough fluids
- Will not wake up or will not interact with you
- Is so unhappy that he or she does not want to be held
- Gets better from the flu but then gets sick again with a fever or cough
- Has a fever with a rash

Whilst in the Emergency Department staff might ask you to wear a mask or to wait in an area where you are less likely to spread your infection.

If you are pregnant

The flu can be very dangerous for pregnant women. If you are pregnant, it is very important that you get the flu vaccine. You should also avoid taking care of anyone who has the flu.

If you are pregnant, you should seek medical attention if you think you might be coming down with the flu. In pregnant women, the symptoms of the flu can get worse very quickly. The flu can even cause trouble with breathing or lead to the death of the woman or her baby. That is why it is so important to seek medical attention as soon as you notice any of the flu symptoms listed above. You will need an antiviral medicine if you are pregnant and have the flu.

Can the flu be treated?

Yes, people with the flu can get medicines called antiviral medicines. These medicines can help people avoid some of the problems caused by the flu. Not every person with the flu needs an antiviral medicine, but your doctor will assess and discuss whether an antiviral medicine is right for you. Antibiotics do not work on the flu.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au