

# Influenza Factsheet

## What is influenza?

- Influenza or 'flu' is an infection caused by a virus. It affects mainly the nose, throat and the lungs.
- There are 3 broad types of influenza virus: A, B and C. Most outbreaks of influenza are caused by type A viruses. These viruses are constantly changing so that different strains predominate from year to year.
- Many people who say (or are told) that they have 'flu' in fact have a bad cold. Usually what people call "gastric flu" is a gastrointestinal infection with another virus like norovirus.

## Who catches influenza?

- Anyone can catch flu; the highest rates of infection are often in school age children.
- Most influenza infections occur during the winter months.
- The amount of illness occurring each year varies and depends largely on how many people are susceptible to that particular virus; this, in turn, depends on whether people have been infected with that, or a similar, virus in the past. If the new viruses differ greatly from previous ones, the population will not have much immunity. Some influenza viruses cause more severe illness than others. Hence in some winters people may have worse disease than in other years.

## How do you catch influenza?

- Influenza is mostly caught by breathing in air containing the virus. The virus is passed into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

## How infectious is influenza?

- Influenza is highly infectious and can spread very rapidly from person to person. Some strains of virus seem more infectious than others, or cause more severe illness.

## What is influenza like?

- Influenza is worse than an ordinary cold. It usually starts suddenly with a high fever of 38-40°C (102-104°F) which lasts 3-4 days. Headaches, chills and a dry cough are common as are general muscle aches and pains which can be severe. A stuffy nose, sneezing and a sore throat can also be present. The fever tends to decrease after the second day when nasal congestion and a sore throat become more noticeable. Some children may also feel sick (nausea), or have vomiting and diarrhoea. 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 the elderly, 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 usually not due to the flu itself, but to secondary bacterial infections causing lung infections (bronchitis and pneumonia) or to a worsening of underlying chronic medical condition such as heart disease.

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

- There is a vaccine against flu. Each year a new vaccine has to be produced to protect against the flu viruses expected to be in circulation that winter. How effective the vaccine will be depends on how well the vaccine strains match the strains of flu that actually circulate that year.
- The vaccine is safe and side effects are uncommon and usually mild. The vaccine should be 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 with chronic heart, lung, liver disease and metabolic disorders (including severe asthma and diabetes). People with kidney problems, or a lowered immune system due to treatment or disease.
  - Everyone aged 65 years and over.
  - Those in long stay residential care accommodation
  - Health care workers involved in the direct care of and/or support to patients.

### **How soon should someone be back at school/ work after influenza?**

- Influenza is most infectious from about a day before symptoms start until about 3 days later. There is no specific exclusion period and people should return once they feel well enough.

### **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 special 'antiviral' medicine will be given.
- It is best to stay at home while feeling ill with influenza as this also reduces the chance of spreading the infection to others.
- The patient should rest and drink fluids to prevent dehydration. Paracetamol or Ibuprofen can be given to reduce the fever; aspirin must NOT be given to young children as it has been associated rarely with the development of a severe neurological disorder called Reye's syndrome.