

# Flu Vaccine

## What is influenza (flu)?

Influenza is a highly infectious acute respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus. It can affect people of any age.

## Symptoms of Flu

Symptoms of flu include sudden fever, chills, headache, muscle pain, sore throat, non-productive dry cough, exhaustion and weakness. Flu characteristically causes a temperature of 102-104° F that lasts 3-4 days.

## The difference between cold and flu

A cold will develop slowly over a few days with symptoms like a sore throat and a blocked or runny nose. The symptom of flu hits you suddenly and severely with symptoms like fever and muscle aches. Flu hits you like a brick. Often people suffering from a bad cold wrongly believe they have flu. Flu causes extreme exhaustion, muscle aches, severe sweats and leaves you so weak you will not be able to get out of bed. Work and other normal routines are not possible with flu.

## Complications of flu

Most people recover from flu in 2-7 days, but in some people it can last for up to two or three weeks. However, flu can be severe and can cause serious illness and death, especially in the very young and in the elderly. Serious respiratory complications can develop, including pneumonia and bronchitis. Older people and those with certain chronic medical conditions are at particular risk of these complications. Pregnant women and women up to six weeks after giving birth have also been found to be at increased risk of the complications of flu. Hospital treatment is needed in some cases, usually in the elderly or people with or serious long term conditions. There are a number of deaths every year from flu. 80 to 90% of reported deaths from influenza occur in the elderly, mainly from bacterial pneumonia, but also from the underlying disease. Bacterial pneumonia is a complication of influenza so it is important that high risk groups also get the pneumococcal vaccine.

## What are the most common complications of flu?

Complications of flu mostly affect people in high-risk groups such as the elderly, pregnant women and those who have a long-term medical condition or weakened immune system.

Bacterial chest infection is the most common complication of flu. Occasionally, this can become serious and develop into pneumonia. A course of antibiotics usually clears up a chest infection or pneumonia, but it can very occasionally become life-threatening, particularly in the frail and elderly. In these situations, the person may need hospitalisation. Pneumonia can be prevented by getting the pneumococcal vaccine which prevents you from getting pneumonia for up to 5 years. The pneumococcal

vaccine is free from your GP to all those over 65 and those with long term medical conditions like diabetes.

Other serious complications of flu are rare and may include ear infection, tonsillitis, septic shock (infection of the blood that causes a severe drop in blood pressure), meningitis (infection in the brain and spinal cord) and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

### **How do people catch flu?**

Flu is a highly infectious illness. Influenza is spread from person to person by direct contact, by droplet infection or by contact with materials recently contaminated by nasal or oral secretions. Airborne spread can also occur. For example, a person carrying the virus can spread the illness by coughing or sneezing. It is highly contagious, especially in close contact environments such as homes for the elderly. A person can spread the virus from 1-2 days before they develop symptoms and for up to a week after symptoms develop.

### **Who is most at risk from flu?**

Anyone can get the flu but it is more severe in people aged 65 years and over and anyone with a chronic medical condition. The list of people most at risk is listed later in this article under “who should get the flu vaccine?”

### **What to you if you get flu?**

There is no cure for the flu once you get it. Treatment consists of treating symptoms like high temperature and ensuring you are warm and comfortable to prevent complications like pneumonia. The flu will usually run its course within 7 days but it can take up to 3 weeks to recover depending on the strain of flu and the general health of the sufferer. If you are otherwise fit and healthy, there is usually no need to see a doctor if you have flu-like symptoms. The best remedy is to rest at home, keep warm and drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration. You can take paracetamol or ibuprofen to lower a high temperature and relieve aches and pains.

However you should see a doctor if you have flu-like symptoms and you are 65 or over, are pregnant, have a long-term medical condition such as diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, kidney or neurological disease or have a weakened immune system. This is because flu can be more serious for you, and your doctor may want to prescribe antiviral medication to prevent complications

Antiviral medicines such as Tamiflu® can reduce the symptoms of flu and shorten its duration, but treatment needs to start soon after flu symptoms have begun in order to be effective. Anti-viral medicines are only available on prescription from your GP and they will only be prescribed if the doctor feels you are at high risk of flu complications. Antibiotics are of no use in the treatment of flu because it is caused by a virus and not bacteria. However, they may be required if you develop complications from flu like a bacterial chest infection.

### **How can flu be prevented?**

The only way flu can be prevented is with vaccination. Vaccinations can be done at your local GP surgery or at your pharmacy. Whelehans pharmacy now administers the flu vaccine. It costs €25 to get the flu vaccine at Whelehans.

### **What is the seasonal (annual) flu vaccine?**

A vaccine, recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO), is prepared each year, using virus strains similar to those considered most likely to circulate in the forthcoming season. Each year the seasonal (annual) flu vaccine contains three common influenza virus strains. The flu virus changes each year this is why a new flu vaccine has to be given each year. This year's flu vaccine contains the Swine Flu strain.

### **How does flu vaccine work?**

Flu vaccine does not contain the flu virus. It contains an inactivated form of the flu virus. The flu vaccine causes the person's immune system to produce antibodies to the flu virus. When someone who has been vaccinated comes into contact with the virus these antibodies attack the virus.

### **Who should get the flu vaccine?**

Vaccination is strongly recommended for "high risk" groups. High risk groups are people who have a greater risk of complications from flu. These include: \*people over 65, \*those with a long-term medical condition such as diabetes, heart or lung disease, \*healthcare workers, \*carers \*residents of nursing homes and other long stay institutions, \*people whose immune system is impaired due to disease or treatment, \*people with regular close contact with poultry, water fowl or pigs, \*with a body mass index (BMI) over 40, \*pregnant women and those 6 weeks after giving birth with long term medical conditions or whose immune system is not working.

### **When to get vaccinated?**

Even if you received the vaccine last year, it is still important for all those in the at risk groups to be vaccinated again this year as immunity from the vaccine only lasts for up to twelve months and wanes over time. The vaccine should be given in late September/October each year. However, it is still not too late to get the vaccine. If you still haven't got the flu vaccine, you can get it now from your doctor or pharmacist. It takes 10 – 14 days for the vaccine to start protecting against flu so it is important to get the vaccine as soon as possible.

### **How safe is flu vaccine?**

Although no medical procedure is totally free of risk, flu vaccines are generally very safe. Seasonal flu vaccines have been given for more than 60 years to millions of people across the world. This year's flu vaccine has been approved throughout Europe. Reactions are generally mild and serious side effects are very rare. The seasonal flu vaccine contains an inactivated virus so it cannot give you the flu. The most common side effects will be mild and will include soreness, redness or swelling where the injection was given. Headache, fever, aches and tiredness may occur. Some people

may experience mild sweating and shivering as their immune system responds to the vaccine but this is not flu and will pass in a day or so.

### **What about recent media reports of side effects from swine flu vaccine?**

There are some reports of a link between the Pandemrix<sup>®</sup> vaccine and narcolepsy in children. Pandemrix<sup>®</sup> was used two years ago as vaccination against swine flu during the swine flu pandemic at the time. However this year's seasonal flu vaccine is different from the Pandemrix<sup>®</sup> vaccine, so there is no risk of narcolepsy. The HSE is investigating "possible links" between Pandemrix<sup>®</sup> and the onset of narcolepsy which causes the sudden onset of sleep.

### **Who should not get the vaccine?**

The vaccine should not be given to people who have severe allergic reaction to eggs.

### **How do I get vaccinated?**

The vaccine is available from your GP or pharmacy. The vaccine and consultation are free to "high risk" groups who have a 'Medical Card' or 'Doctor Visit Card'. Family doctors charge and pharmacies have a charge for flu vaccinations for those who do not have a 'Medical Card' or 'Doctor Visit Card'. It costs €25 in Whelehans Pharmacy.

### **Pneumococcal vaccine**

If you are over 65 or have a long term medical condition it is important to get the pneumococcal vaccine which protects against pneumonia. Protection from the pneumococcal vaccine lasts 5 years. Pneumonia is a severe bacterial infection of the lungs and is quite often a complication of flu. It is the main cause of death from flu.

As well as people over 65, those whose health is compromised by other health problems such as diabetes, chronic heart, lung or liver disease and smoking should get the pneumococcal vaccination. It is free of charge through your GP to those in the high risk groups described.

Pneumonia is one of the most common causes of death every winter in people over 65. It is estimated that pneumonia causes 200 deaths every winter in Ireland. Fortunately it is easily prevented by a simple vaccine from your GP. Many of you have heard the HSE's recent radio ad campaign with Brendan Grace highlighting that only one in seven people over 65 have received the pneumococcal vaccine. If you have not yet received the vaccine and you are over 65, there is no excuse; it is free of charge from your GP. You are putting your life at risk if you don't get it. As Brendan Grace would say, pneumonia is no joke.

**Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended**

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to [www.whelehans.ie](http://www.whelehans.ie) or dial 04493 34591. You can also e-mail queries to [info@whelehans.ie](mailto:info@whelehans.ie).