

Flu (influenza)

Influenza, commonly called 'the flu', is an infection caused by the *influenza virus*. It affects the nose, throat, lungs and other parts of the body. In children who are otherwise fit and healthy, the flu is much like a bad cold. Flu symptoms may last longer than a cold and your child may be more unwell with it, but almost all children fight off the infection by themselves. Treatment for the flu and a bad cold is much the same. Occasionally, flu can cause serious illness. This depends on the type of virus and the child's age and general health – the flu can be more serious in children who also have an underlying chronic disease. Your doctor can provide more advice if this is the case with your child.

Signs and symptoms

Flu in children usually causes at least two or three of the following symptoms:

- A fever that starts suddenly
- Aches and pains or headache
- Cough, sore throat or noisy breathing (croup)
- Low energy
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea.

Children at risk:

Contact a doctor if your child has any one or more of the symptoms above AND:

- Is less than 12 months old
- Was born prematurely and is less than 2 years old
- Has been in hospital within the last 3 months
- Becomes more drowsy than usual
- Has trouble feeding
- Develops a rash
- Develops noisy breathing or has trouble breathing
- Complains of pains in the chest
- Has chronic heart disease, cystic fibrosis or other chronic lung condition, asthma, diabetes, an organ transplant, cancer or leukaemia.

How is it spread?

Flu is very infectious. It can spread through the air by coughing and sneezing as well as by hands, cups and other objects that have been in contact with an infected person's mouth or nose. Good hygiene habits can greatly reduce the chance of your child getting the flu or passing it to others. If your child has the flu:

- Do not send your child to day care or school.
- Do not share cups or cutlery.
- Minimise close contact with family and friends.

- Encourage your child to cough and sneeze into tissues. Throw the tissues away and make sure the child's hands are washed.

Treatment

Give your child plenty of bed rest, encourage them to drink lots of fluids and give them paracetamol if needed to help any pain or discomfort. Do NOT give aspirin. Do not send your child to day care or school. Antibiotics are not helpful for the flu and will not be prescribed unless your child also has a bacterial infection. Antiviral medications (such as Tamiflu and Relenza) are not given to children who already have the flu and who are otherwise fit and healthy. This is because they do not usually make a difference to the illness. By the time a person is sick with the flu, it is usually too late for the medications to make any difference. Continue usual medications (eg. for asthma and diabetes).

Should I get my child vaccinated?

If your child has a chronic medical condition, it is recommended they have an annual flu vaccination. Talk to your family doctor. If your child is normally fit and well, it may still be worthwhile getting this year's influenza vaccination (up until the end of October) if you or your children have not had it. The vaccination is still the best way of preventing the flu.

Key points to remember

- Flu is very infectious so good hygiene is very important.
- Keep infected children away from other people.
- Encourage your child to have lots to drink.
- Give paracetamol for pain or discomfort if needed.
- Contact your doctor if your child shows any of the symptoms discussed in this factsheet and has any of the listed risks.

For more information

- See your family doctor
- RCH Immunisation Service tel (03) 9345 6599
- Call Nurse-on-Call Tel **1300 60 60 24** (free call in Victoria)
- Seasonal Flu / Influenza immunisation factsheets from DHS
- RCH factsheet: Fever in children

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Disclaimer: The information contained on the site is intended to support not replace discussion with your doctor or health care professionals. The authors accept no responsibility for any inaccuracies, information perceived as misleading, or the success of any treatment regimen detailed in the handouts.

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