
Influenza (flu)

- > Influenza (the flu) is a common, highly contagious virus that affects the respiratory system.
- > The virus can cause a mild to serious illness and even death in young children, older adults and vulnerable people.
- > Getting the [influenza vaccine](#) is your best protection against influenza.
- > The influenza vaccine is recommended for everyone from 6 months of age.
- > Influenza is not the same as the [common cold](#) or [COVID-19](#).

How do you get influenza?

Influenza is a highly contagious disease.

The virus is spread through air or water droplets when someone coughs, sneezes or talks. These droplets can settle onto hard surfaces, e.g. doorknobs, so you can catch influenza from touching a contaminated surface with the influenza virus on it, and then touching your mouth, eyes or nose.

Influenza spreads even more quickly among large groups (e.g. childcare centres, aged care and healthcare facilities) and infection rates can be 2-3 times higher.

Notifiable disease

Influenza is a notifiable disease. This means doctors, hospitals and laboratories must inform the Department of Health of your diagnosis. This allows the Department to monitor the extent of influenza cases in our community and to take necessary action in some situations, for example outbreaks in day care or aged care centres. Notification is confidential.

What are the signs and symptoms of influenza?

Most healthy children and adults only have minor symptoms.

Typical symptoms in adults can include:

- > sudden onset of fever
- > headache
- > sore throat
- > runny nose
- > cough
- > fatigue (tiredness)
- > general aches and pains
- > nose, throat and lung congestion.

Most people recover within a few days, but in some people with existing medical conditions more serious infections can occur such as pneumonia or inflammation of the lungs, resulting in a much longer illness.

Influenza symptoms in children

Influenza symptoms in children can include symptoms which are more uncommon in adults, such as:

- > nausea (feeling sick)
- > vomiting
- > diarrhoea.

You should see your doctor urgently if your child's health worsens or you notice new symptoms developing.

Signs to watch for include:

- > fast breathing or difficulty breathing
- > skin starts to turn blue
- > refusal to eat or drink
- > not waking up properly or not interacting
- > being extremely irritable, and not wanting to be held
- > fever and a rash
- > persistent vomiting.

People at high risk

It's important for people at higher risk of developing a serious illness or health complications from influenza to see a doctor immediately for a medical diagnosis.

If you only have mild symptoms, you should stay at home until you are feeling better.

See a doctor if you start experiencing the following symptoms:

- > fast breathing or difficulty breathing
- > skin starting to turn blue
- > pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- > sudden dizziness
- > confusion
- > a rash
- > persistent vomiting.

In some cases, the influenza-like symptoms can improve but then return with a fever and a worse cough.

How do you treat influenza?

In most cases, someone with influenza will recover naturally within 2 to 7 days.

If you have mild symptoms and are not at increased risk of developing severe illness from influenza, you should stay at home and rest until you are well.

Recommended treatment for mild to moderate influenza

- > Take paracetamol to help reduce fever and head and muscle aches.
- > Get plenty of rest.
- > Drink plenty of fluids.
- > Eat healthy food.

Decongestants and other cold remedies will not help and antibiotics do not treat influenza unless you have secondary bacterial infection (which must be diagnosed by a doctor).

Antiviral medication can help to manage your illness but only if you are treated early, within 12 to 48 hours of showing influenza symptoms. Influenza is not usually diagnosed within this period, so it is not commonly used (except in special circumstances).

While you have influenza

- > Stay home from school or work and avoid contact with other people.
- > Wash your hands often, especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose and before you prepare any food.
- > Use disposable tissues and immediately throw used tissues in the bin.
- > Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze.

Who is most at risk of influenza?

Influenza can be a serious illness. Some people are more at risk of severe complications if they get influenza including:

- > babies and young children
- > pregnant women
- > older people
- > people with chronic medical conditions
- > Aboriginal people.

Are you in one of the above groups?

If you develop influenza-like symptoms seek medical attention.

To protect yourself, you are strongly encouraged to get an [influenza vaccine](#) every year. Throughout June 2022, all Western Australians are can access a free influenza vaccine through immunisation providers.

How can we prevent the spread of influenza? Is there an influenza vaccine?

Get vaccinated for influenza

The best way to prevent catching influenza is to get an influenza vaccination every year.

Everyone is encouraged to get the influenza vaccine.

Some groups of people are at higher risk of serious complications from influenza and are strongly recommended to get immunised. (Refer to 'Who is most at risk of influenza?' section above). People in these high risk groups can get a free government-funded influenza vaccine.

The influenza vaccine protects people against the influenza virus and the common complications of this infection. Each year, a new vaccine containing the most common strains of circulating influenza viruses is produced.

You can get vaccinated for influenza at [immunisation providers including GP clinics, community health clinics and Aboriginal Medical Services](#).

Find out more about the [influenza vaccine](#).

For further information, contact your immunisation provider.

Protect yourself against influenza

Follow these tips to help prevent the spread of influenza:

- > **Cover coughs** and sneezes with your inner elbow, or use a tissue and throw it in the bin straight away.
- > **Wash your hands** often with soap and water or use antibacterial hand sanitisers, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- > **Clean surfaces** and objects regularly such as doorknobs, keyboards, phones and toys.
- > **Stay at home** if you have influenza and limit your contact with other people.

Learn more about [hand hygiene](#) and [protecting yourself from viruses](#) such as influenza.

Beating the bugs, colds and viruses

What is the difference between influenza and a cold?

Although influenza symptoms are similar to cold symptoms (especially in children), the influenza virus is more severe and lasts much longer than a cold.

Read more about the [common cold](#).

Symptom	Influenza	Cold
Headache and aches and pains	Common May be less severe	Rare
Fatigue and weakness	Common Last days	Uncommon Usually mild
Runny/stuffy nose	Uncommon	Common
Sore throat	Uncommon	Common
Cough	Common Dry or moist	Common Moist

What is the difference between influenza and COVID-19?

Influenza and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses.

COVID-19 and influenza have several differences, including different causes, complications and treatments. COVID-19 and influenza also spread differently, have different severity levels and a few different symptoms.

You cannot tell the difference between influenza and COVID-19 just by looking at the symptoms alone because they have some of the same symptoms. That's why testing is needed to tell what the illness is and to confirm a diagnosis.

Can I catch both COVID-19 and influenza at the same time?

While it's quite rare, it's possible to become infected with both at the same time because influenza and COVID-19 are caused by different viruses.

As they both have similar symptoms, the only way to know for sure is to get tested.

Both COVID-19 and influenza can result in serious illness, hospitalisation and even death. If you get sick with both, it could increase your risk of having serious symptoms.

[Research has shown \(external site\)](#) that you are twice as likely to die if infected with both than with COVID-19 alone.

The best defence against influenza is to get an influenza vaccine every year. COVID-19 vaccination is also the best defence for COVID-19. Wearing a mask, washing hands frequently and social distancing can also help stop the spread of COVID-19 and influenza.

How do I know which virus I have?

RAT and COVID-19 PCRs only detect COVID-19 – they do not detect influenza as it is a different virus.

To find out if you have influenza you need to visit your GP or healthcare provider to get tested.

Where to get help

- > See your doctor
- > Visit [healthdirect \(external site\)](#) or call 1800 022 222
- > Phone the National Immunisation Information Line on 1800 671 811
- > For emergency or life-threatening conditions, visit an emergency department or dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance

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See also

- > Influenza (flu) vaccine
- > Childhood immunisation schedule
- > Childhood immunisation
- > Protect yourself from viruses
- > COVID-19 (coronavirus)

Related sites

- > [Influenza – Australian Government Department of Health \(external site\)](#)
- > [Video – Beating the bugs, colds and viruses \(external site\)](#)
- > [National Immunisation Program schedule \(external site\)](#)
- > [healthdirect \(external site\)](#)