Influenza immunisation
What you need to know

What is influenza (flu)?
Influenza, commonly known as flu, is a contagious disease caused by the influenza virus. It is easily spread by coughing or sneezing, or by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your mouth or nose.

Symptoms of flu may include:
- fever
- sore throat
- chills
- tiredness
- cough
- headache
- muscle/body aches
- vomiting
- runny nose
- fatigue/tiredness
- general aches and pains
- nose, throat and lung congestion.

How serious is the flu?
Flu is much more severe in pregnant women, infants, the elderly, Aboriginal people and people with certain health conditions such as heart, lung or kidney disease or a weakened immune system. However, even healthy people can get the flu and experience severe illness. Flu can cause high fever and pneumonia, and make existing medical conditions worse.

During the 2018 influenza season, approximately 26,000 people attended an emergency department (ED) with flu-like illness in Perth. Just over 21 per cent of these people were admitted to hospital.

What is the influenza (flu) vaccine?
All the brands of the flu vaccine available in the 2019 program in Western Australia use parts of the killed virus to create an immune response which can protect you from becoming sick if you get exposed to the flu. The flu vaccine contains only killed virus particles – not living viruses – so immunisation cannot cause flu.

healthywa.wa.gov.au/immunisation
Influenza viruses are always changing. Each year, scientists try to match the strains of influenza viruses in the vaccine to those most likely to cause flu illnesses that year. It takes up to two weeks for protection to develop after vaccination. Protection from the flu vaccine may start to decrease after 3 to 4 months, so it is recommended to get the flu vaccine in late autumn (May or June) for maximum protection during flu season.

**Who should receive the flu vaccine?**

The following groups are at increased risk from influenza and its complications and are strongly recommended to receive the flu vaccine. These groups are eligible to receive the vaccine free through the government funded programs:

- people 65 years and older
- children 6 months to less than 5 years
- pregnant women (any trimester)
- Aboriginal people 6 months and older
- individuals 6 months and older who have medical conditions that place them at risk for complications of influenza, namely:
  - cardiac disease
  - chronic neurological conditions
  - chronic respiratory conditions
  - chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow-up or hospitalisation in the preceding year
  - diabetes and other metabolic disorders
  - haematological disorders
  - impaired immunity
  - renal disease
  - children 6 months to 10 years receiving long term aspirin therapy.

The flu vaccine is also available at a fee to others through GPs, Aboriginal Medical Services and community immunisation clinics.

**When is the best time to get the flu vaccine?**

It is recommended to get the flu vaccine in late autumn (May or June) for maximum protection during flu season.

**Who is unable to have the flu vaccine?**

Tell your healthcare provider if you have ever had a severe allergy resulting in a swelling of the lips or tongue, acute respiratory distress, or collapse (anaphylactic response) from the flu vaccine. You should also tell your healthcare provider if you have ever had Guillain-Barre syndrome (a severe illness causing muscle weakness). Your doctor will help you decide whether the vaccine is recommended for you.

**Note:** People with an egg allergy, including anaphylaxis, can be safely vaccinated with the influenza vaccines.
Why should I get my child immunised against the flu?

Anyone can get the flu, but rates of infection and hospitalisation are highest among young children.

Experience from Australia and overseas indicates that the majority of childhood flu-related hospitalisations and deaths occur among children without underlying medical conditions.

Annual flu immunisation is strongly recommended for anyone 6 months of age or older.

Children and adults with a medical condition that place them at higher risk of severe illness from flu are eligible for a free flu vaccine through the National Immunisation Program. For example, individuals with heart, lung or kidney disease or a weakened immune system.

11% of all reported flu cases in Perth were in children under 5

27% of children under 5 diagnosed with flu were hospitalised

Influenza immunisation in WA children in 2018

Reported reactions were mild. Less than 1% of parents sought medical advice

Only 19% of children under 5 were protected against flu through immunisation

Don’t put your child at risk, get the flu vaccine today.

Sources:
1. WA Notifiable Infectious Diseases Database (WANIDD)
2. AusVaxSafety
3. Australian Immunisation Register (AIR).
What are the risks from the flu vaccine?

Any medicine, including a vaccine, has potential serious side effects such as a severe allergic reaction. However, the risk of the flu vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small.

**Common, mild reactions** can occur after receiving the flu vaccine. These may include low-grade fever, aches and soreness, or redness or swelling where the vaccine was given. If these problems occur, they usually begin soon after the vaccine was given, last one to two days, and resolve without specific treatment.

**Serious reactions** such as severe allergic reactions to the flu vaccine can occur, but are very rare. People experiencing an extreme reaction should call an ambulance and see a doctor immediately.

What if I have a reaction after flu immunisation?

Call an ambulance or go to a hospital emergency department immediately if you have signs of a severe allergic reaction, such as:

- difficulty breathing
- hoarse voice or wheezing
- paleness
- coughing
- hives
- losing consciousness.

If you develop a fever higher than 38.5 °C following immunisation take paracetamol (not aspirin) as directed on the package (depending on your weight and age), take extra fluids and dress lightly.

You should also consult your doctor if you experience any other unusual symptoms after immunisation, such as fever, convulsion and behaviour changes.

Although convulsion after immunisation is uncommon, you need to be aware of this possibility and should monitor your child for fever. Paracetamol can be used to reduce fever.

Tell your doctor what happened, the date and time it happened, and when the immunisation was given. If your doctor is not available, call [healthdirect](1800 022 222, 24 hours a day) where a registered nurse will provide free advice about health issues and what to do next.

Vaccine safety is continually monitored. If you have symptoms you think may be a reaction to a vaccine, tell the doctor or nurse who gave the vaccination. You may also report the reaction yourself to the [Western Australian Vaccine Safety Surveillance (WAVSS)](aefican.org.au) system on the Adverse Events Following Immunisation – Clinical Assessment Network website or by calling the [Central Immunisation Clinic](9321 1312, Monday to Friday (8.30am to 4.30pm)).