

Information about influenza – FACT SHEET FOR STAFF

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What is influenza?

Influenza (the flu) is a very infectious illness caused by a virus. It is much more serious than a common cold and can leave you ill for up to 10 days. Symptoms of the flu include: a high fever, headache, muscle aches and pains, fatigue, cough, sore throat, or a runny nose. It may take up to three days to feel symptoms after you catch the flu (the incubation period).

Anyone can get the flu – being fit, active and healthy does not protect you from getting this virus.

Anyone can die from the flu – it kills at least 100 New Zealanders every year, including some young, fit people.

What can you do to prevent getting the flu?

Every year, ask your doctor to vaccinate you against the flu. Because the influenza virus changes frequently, you need to get vaccinated every year to stay immune. Some people can get this free. Vaccination is free for people aged 65 years and over, and adults and children with certain long-term (chronic) conditions. Your GP will know if you are eligible for a free vaccination.

The flu is very easily spread through coughs and sneezes. If you have the flu, avoid public places and close contact with other people. Always cough and sneeze into a disposable tissue. Put the tissue in a rubbish bin and wash your hands well afterwards.

How likely is an influenza pandemic?

It is certain an influenza pandemic will happen one day. The H5N1 avian influenza virus that is found in some countries could become a pandemic influenza virus at any time.

What is New Zealand doing to prepare for an influenza pandemic?

New Zealand has been planning for this for some time. The Ministry of Health has a national pandemic plan, and District Health Boards have local plans. The New Zealand Government, following the advice of the World Health Organization, is stockpiling anti-viral medicine to help reduce the impact of a pandemic on New Zealanders. By the end of 2005 there will be enough anti-viral medicine for about 21 percent of the population.

Is there a vaccine available for a flu pandemic?

The Ministry of Health has a formal arrangement with Australia's CSL Ltd - the only influenza vaccine manufacturer in the Southern Hemisphere - which gives us a guaranteed supply if we need a pandemic vaccine. However, manufacture of such a vaccine can only start once we know the strain of the virus causing the pandemic, and so a vaccine is not currently available.

What could happen in an influenza pandemic?

A pandemic could mean so many people are sick that it will affect workplaces, schools, hospitals and many other services. There would be public announcements on TV, the radio and through other media channels that there is an influenza pandemic. Some workplaces and schools may close. Normal health and other services may not be available for several weeks. You may be asked to care for yourself and others at home.

How can you prepare for an influenza pandemic?

- Talk to your family and friends about health hygiene – hand washing, and safe coughing and sneezing.
- Make sure you have an emergency survival kit. Plan for having about a week's worth of essential supplies such as non-perishable food, as well as plenty of fluids. For further information see the Ministry of Civil Defense and Emergency Management website on What to Do in a disaster.
- Include paracetamol (for fever) in your home emergency survival kit.
- Have a plan for what you and your family would do if you had to stay at home during a pandemic.

How do you care for yourself and your family during an influenza pandemic?

- Stay home if you are sick and keep away from other people – avoid visitors and visiting other people.
- Wash and dry your hands after you cough, sneeze, wipe or blow your nose (or your child's nose), use the bathroom or toilet. Wash and dry your hands before you prepare food and eat, and when you are looking after sick people.
- Keep coughs and sneezes covered. Tissues are best. Put the tissue in a rubbish bin.
- Give people who have a fever and/or diarrhoea plenty to drink.
- Give paracetamol for fever. *Do not give aspirin to children under 12.*
- Try to keep well people and sick people apart.
- Sharing bedding, clothing and utensils may spread infection, but you do not need to wash a sick person's bedding, clothing and utensils separately from the rest of the family's.