



## FLU VACCINATION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **What is the flu?**

Flu is a highly contagious viral disease and is easily spread through coughing and sneezing. It is an infection, initially of the respiratory tract, caused by a virus. Each case of the flu can cause multiple days of bed disability, work absenteeism and restricted activity. Symptoms include; abrupt onset of fever, muscular pains, headache, sore throat and coughing. Flu can persist for days or weeks. Each year 10-20% of the community may be infected by the flu.

### **Why should I consider having the Flu shot this year?**

- Maximises health and well being.
- Protects from spreading the virus to friends, family or work colleagues.
- Working whilst affected with influenza can be unproductive & a safety hazard.
- Flu can last for several days or even weeks – which can impact on your quality time with family and friends and limit your social activities.
- Time-off work due to influenza can increase your workload, or that of those around you.

### **Can you get the flu from the Flu vaccine?**

The Flu vaccine does not contain live flu virus, so it **cannot** cause influenza infection. The flu vaccine takes about 2 weeks to provide full protection against the flu. People who catch flu during this period may mistakenly blame the vaccine for causing the flu.

The vaccine will not protect you against the common cold and other respiratory viruses that may be mistaken for flu, or even against a new strain of flu that is very different from the viruses in the vaccine.

### **What is the difference between the flu and the common cold?**

The flu and the common cold are distinct illnesses caused by quite different viruses.

Influenza is a more severe illness that arises suddenly in the form of fever, headaches, muscle aches and pains, and extreme tiredness. The flu initially comes on very quickly and is severe immediately, however the symptoms can last up to 3 weeks. Flu can lead to pneumonia, hospitalisation, and can be life threatening in some people, particularly the elderly and those with medical conditions, such as heart or lung problems.

The common cold occurs more gradually and causes milder symptoms that resolve relatively quickly. Colds tend to begin slowly and symptoms include a sore throat, blocked or runny nose, and a cough. A cold doesn't have the same potential as flu to develop into a life-threatening illness.

### **If I am fit and healthy, do I still need the flu vaccine?**

Even fit and healthy people are affected by the flu! The flu is likely to cause general discomfort due to aches, pains and tiredness, and disruption to your daily life. There is also the potential to spread the flu to colleagues and family. It is therefore worthwhile for all adults to consider vaccination against the flu.

### **Can the vaccine cause harmful side effects?**

The flu vaccine is generally well tolerated. Like all medicines, vaccines may have side effects. Some redness, tenderness, discomfort or swelling is common at the injection site, but this usually settles within a few days. Some people have a slight fever, muscle pains and generally feel a bit unwell for a few days after vaccination. The 'flu-like symptoms' do not mean they have the flu.

### **How effective is the flu vaccine?**

No vaccine is 100% effective; however the flu vaccine is 70% to 90% effective. Flu vaccinations protect only against the flu strains in the vaccine for the current year. They will not protect you against the many other viruses that are around every winter. Some of these cause similar symptoms to flu, but flu is generally more serious than these other infections.

### **How is the vaccine made up?**

The flu vaccine contains antigens that correlate to 4 different strains of the flu virus (2 'A' strains and 2 'B' strains). Medical experts from the World Health Organisation (WHO) select the strains each year based on circulating strains. The vaccine is then approved by the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) amongst other organisations. The viruses are grown in hens' eggs, then killed and purified before being made into vaccine.

### **Why do we need a vaccination every year?**

Each year, the circulating flu virus tends to change, so the vaccine is updated to include the most current flu virus strains. Also, the protection that the body makes after being vaccinated declines over time, so one year after being vaccinated the levels are lower and may not offer protection.

### **How are the strains selected?**

The WHO has over 100 national flu centres worldwide, which analyse viruses and provide updates on changing strains. Each year, the WHO recommends what strains make up the vaccine for the forthcoming year. In Australia, the Australian Influenza Vaccine Committee then determines the final vaccine formulation.

### **Who should be vaccinated?**

Anyone who wishes to reduce the likelihood of getting the flu. However, it is particularly important for the following groups of people;

- People aged 65 or older.
- Adults and children with heart or lung disease (including people with asthma).
- Anyone who lives, works or volunteers in a nursing home, chronic care facility, or retirement home.
- Adults and children with diabetes, other metabolic disease, cancer, kidney disease, a blood disorder or anyone whose immune system is weakened.
- Anyone who works or volunteers in healthcare.
- Emergency service workers – including fire, police and ambulance staff.
- Anyone who lives in the same household as, or is in close contact with, a person who is at increased risk of complications from flu should also consider vaccination.

### **When should people be vaccinated?**

Flu vaccination is best before outbreaks occur. The peak flu activity in most parts of Australia usually occurs in the May to September period. It is best to receive the vaccination between March and May.

### **Is there anyone who should not get vaccinated?**

- Infants under six months of age.
- Anyone with a serious allergy to eggs or egg products.
- Anyone who had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the flu vaccine.
- Persons who are ill with a fever at the time that the vaccination is being given. If in doubt, ask your doctor.
- Anyone with a history of Guillain–Barré syndrome

Any of these points listed above should be discussed with your GP.