

Media alert Nationwide

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Flu is here: With numbers climbing, Mum's are hit the hardest!

With more than 20,979 laboratory confirmed cases in the country*, Australia is experiencing double the number of cases than at the same time last year.

The Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) is monitoring the spread and impact of the disease in Australia & New Zealand and reports a sharp increase in the number to more than 20,979, which is really only the tip of the iceberg, as these are laboratory confirmed cases of the virus and many more go unreported. Swine flu — or H1N1 — make up the majority of cases**.

The records show more than 8259 cases of laboratory confirmed influenza among younger people, aged between 20 and 49. And in this age group it is females, many of them mums copping it the hardest - with about 25% more women than men currently getting sick with the flu ¹. Which is not surprising if you take a closer look.

An ISG Focus Group showed in 2012, that 70% of females in Australia are not vaccinated. And mums are at the frontline of any flu epidemic. It is their children, especially little children, who bring it home in droves. Children are much more likely to contract influenza in any given season (20-50% compared with 10-30% in adults), with up to 70% of children contracting the virus during pandemic years.² So it's really crazy that mums - whose households, families and paid jobs grind to a halt if they are struck down with flu - are missing out on flu shots.

Mums are usually the primary caretaker in the household and often have to juggle the various demands of busy modern life. The mix of keeping their productivity and energy levels up at work, managing the household chores, and taking care of children, flu season can become a veritable nightmare.

It was just a normal Friday evening earlier this year, when 40 year old Gold Coast resident, Gai O'Dwyer began experiencing severe headaches and body cramps. Over the week-end her symptoms worsened and she felt really sick. So she went to see her GP who suspected a case of influenza and did a nasal swab test. The diagnosis was confirmed a few days later by the laboratory results, which specified the virus as Influenza A. What followed was an extremely difficult six weeks for Gai and her family. Her husband had to take two weeks off work to care for her and their young daughter while she recovered.

"I just had no idea that the flu could do this to me," explains Gai. "I'm fit, I'm young and healthy. I very rarely get sick. This experience was physically, emotionally and financially very challenging for me and my family. Had I known I could have prevented all this, I would have been vaccinated a long time ago."

Gai's story demonstrates that the flu can have a major impact even on the young and healthy. Yet there is a large group within the population who are at even greater risk of serious complications from flu, and they are those with an underlying medical condition.

The ISG estimates that up to one third of the Australian population, many in the younger age groups, could face an increased risk of severe complications should they contract Influenza this flu season, yet only 30-40 per cent of people in this high risk category are being immunised.

And that is not the end of the story. "People tend to think of the flu as an illness that has its worst impact on the elderly", notes Dr Alan Hampson Chairman of the Influenza Specialist Group. "The reality is that influenza

results in 18,000 hospitalisations every year.³ Many of those seriously affected are not elderly people. They are regular working people.”

So it is late but not too late to get vaccinated against Influenza. “Vaccination is the single best protection” Dr Hampson adds, “With vaccination, you are protecting yourself and those around you from serious illness. But don’t put it off. The window is rapidly closing because your body needs time to respond to the vaccine.”

The flu vaccine is free for: pregnant women, those aged over 65 years, Indigenous Australians 15 years or older, and children and adults suffering underlying medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, kidney disease, chronic neurological disease, and impaired immunity.

And if you missed the flu shot and do get sick? A recent study has revealed that two in three Aussie workers incorrectly believe, that antibiotics are effective in treating the flu.⁴ The study, published by NPS MedicineWise, has revealed a lack of understanding around the severity of influenza and the need for education around prevention and treatment. In short, antibiotics only work for bacterial infections, whereas influenza is due to a virus and requires prescription antivirals administered early to treat infection.

And Professor Robert Booy of the Children’s Hospital, Westmead warns that while it is fine to take analgesics and other non-prescription medications to make you feel better when you contract the flu it is important to realise that they only dull the symptoms and have no influence on the infection itself, although some may make incorrect claims to the contrary. It is really important to rest until the acute symptoms of fever and aches are no longer there when you withdraw these medications. If you do have typical flu symptoms, fever, muscular aches, headache and cough you can get prescription anti-flu medication (antivirals) which will aid recovery but it must be taken within the first two days of symptom onset to be effective.

* **The majority of notifications have been in Queensland with 6818, NSW has had 6650, Victoria 2715, SA 2023, WA 1906, NT 334, Tasmania 216 and ACT 317. Please note all figures are based on Data as of 11th August 2014.**

** **In NSW the influenza A(H3N2) strain is predominating.**

What: Flu is here campaign Influenza Specialist Group
When: Tuesday, 12th August 2014
Where: Nation Wide
Interviews: Influenza Expert and Chairman of the ISG Dr Alan Hampson or Flu Patient Gai O’Dwyer

Contact the ISG’s media team for an interview with Influenza Expert and ISG Chairman Dr Alan Hampson, Flu Patient Gai O’Dwyer or a spokesperson in your state:

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For more info about the flu, the vaccine and how to protect yourself visit: www.flusmart.org.au

References:

¹ Australian Government Department of Health, National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System
http://www9.health.gov.au/cda/source/rpt_5.cfm

² Neuzil KM, Hohlbein C, Zhu Y. Illness Among Schoolchildren During Influenza Season. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2002;156:986-991
<http://www.flusmart.org.au>

³ Newall, A et al. Economic report into the cost of influenza to the Australian health system. March 2007.

⁴ Two in three Aussie workers incorrectly believe antibiotics work for colds and flu: <http://www.nps.org.au/media-centre/media-releases/repository/Two-in-three-Aussie-workers-incorrectly-believe-antibiotics-work-for-colds-and-flu>

Background Material:

Flu prevention tips – you can protect yourself and others by being flu smart

1, Practice good cough and sneeze etiquette!

- turn away from other people
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve
- use disposable tissues rather than a handkerchief (which could store the virus)
- put used tissues into the nearest bin, rather than a pocket or handbag
- wash your hands or use an alcohol hand rub as soon as possible afterwards.

2, Hand washing can limit the spread of influenza and other respiratory virus infections. Always wash your hands – even when they are not visibly dirty:

- after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose
- after being in contact with someone who has a cold or flu
- before touching your eyes, nose or mouth
- before preparing food and eating.
- The best way to kill the flu virus is to wash your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based product (gels, rinses, foams) that doesn't require water.

3, Stop the spread of cold and flu in your household:

- As flu viruses can survive for more than eight hours on hard surfaces such as stainless steel and plastic, you should regularly clean frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, taps, tables, benches and fridge doors. Flu viruses can be removed with normal household detergents.
- Keep any personal items such as towels, bedding and toothbrushes separate. Do not share eating and drinking utensils, food or drinks.
- Prescription antiviral medications are only effective if they have been taken within the first 48 hours of symptoms.
- Each year, the Australian Influenza Vaccine Committee (AIVC) determines an up to date influenza vaccine formulation based on the most recent virus strains.
- Annual vaccination reduces the risk of contracting influenza and severity of symptoms.

Flu treatment tips

The old adage prevention is better than cure very much applies to the flu. The best way to protect yourself and others from influenza is by getting vaccinated each year. **Typical flu symptoms include:**

- high fever
- chills
- severe cough
- headaches
- muscle aches or pain
- sore throat
- children's symptoms may also include nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea

Is prescription influenza medication helpful in treating the flu?

Antiviral flu medication prescribed by your GP can be effective in treating Influenza. Flu antivirals must be taken within 48 hours of noticing symptoms for them to work. The earlier influenza medications are taken the better – you won't feel instantly better but your recovery time will be shorter and you limit the chance of any secondary issues.

Treating the symptoms

Over the counter pain medication will help relieve the symptoms of the flu but won't stop the progress of the virus. One of the best ways to work through the flu is to keep hydrated – drinking lots of water will help you deal with all of the aches and pains and your fever.

Even if your painkillers are making you feel better, it's essential to rest and relax when you have the flu; this gives your body a better chance at fighting the flu virus – otherwise your symptoms might hang around even longer.

The best flu treatment is to rest!

You will have heard of many cold and flu remedies; the best flu treatment is bed rest until the acute symptoms are gone. The acute symptoms of the flu typically last up to a week but may last longer. Unlike the common cold, it may take several weeks to fully recover from influenza – even in healthy young people.

Your reaction times are worse than when under the influence of alcohol

Even mild episodes of the flu are associated with impaired reaction times – up to 40% slower. By comparison, drinking alcohol has been shown to reduce reaction times by up to 10%. What's even more alarming is post-flu impaired reactions persist once the primary symptoms have settled.

Complications from the flu can be nasty and include:

- pneumonia
- bronchitis
- cardiovascular issues
- sinus and ear infections
- worsening of pre-existing respiratory conditions
- worsening of other problems such as diabetes

If you contract the flu, rest.

Flu Facts

In Australia flu causes:

- 1,500–3,500 deaths annually - more than the road toll - depending on the severity of the season
- 18,000 extra hospitalisations
- 300,000 extra GP visits
- Millions of dollars in healthcare and workplace productivity costs
- An estimated 15% of adults and 30% (or more) of young children will be infected annually.

Is the flu dangerous?

Yes. Influenza is a highly contagious, potentially fatal disease that is estimated to cause between 1,500 and 3,500 deaths annually. This is higher than the national road toll.

The flu can cause serious illness, particularly in people with underlying medical conditions, older adults, pregnant women and young children. Influenza can make other conditions, including respiratory or heart problems, even worse.

How long does the flu virus live outside the body?

The virus can spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes small virus-containing droplets into the air. If you are nearby, you can breathe them in and infect your respiratory tract. The influenza virus can survive for more than 8 hours on hard surfaces such as a traffic light button, a telephone, the photocopier or the handle of a supermarket trolley. Touching contaminated surfaces (including hands) and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes can also lead to infection.

How do you catch the flu?

Commonly known as 'the flu', influenza is a highly contagious disease.

The viruses are spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes small droplets containing the virus into the air. If you're nearby, you can breathe them in and infect your respiratory tract.

Is the flu vaccine safe for pregnant women?

Yes, international studies have shown that the vaccine is safe for pregnant women and actually protect mother and baby. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently announced pregnant women as the highest priority for flu vaccination. The flu shot for pregnant women has a 3 for 1 benefit: It protects the mother, the unborn baby, and the newborn infant by protective antibodies that are passed through the placenta and breast milk.

What's the difference between the 'flu and a cold?

Many people confuse the common cold with influenza. However, influenza is usually much more severe and can lead to hospitalization and death.

Is it free?

Flu vaccine is free for Australians who qualify under the National Immunisation Program (NIP), namely:

Pregnant women;

All individuals aged 65 years and over;

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over;

Individuals aged 6 months and over with medical conditions predisposing to severe influenza, namely;

- Cardiac disease, including cyanotic congenital heart disease, coronary artery disease and congestive heart failure
- Chronic respiratory conditions, including suppurative lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and severe asthma
- Other chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow up or hospitalisation in the previous year, including diabetes mellitus, chronic metabolic diseases, chronic renal failure and haemoglobinopathies
- Chronic neurological conditions that impact on respiratory function, including multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injuries and seizure disorders
- Impaired immunity, including HIV, malignancy and chronic steroid use
- Children aged 6 months to 10 years on long term aspirin therapy

About the Influenza Specialist Group

The ISG is a not for profit organization that aims to reduce the impact of influenza in Australia through educational programs and public awareness activities. The ISG works in conjunction with key Australian professional and consumer groups and the Australian Federal, State and Territory Departments of Health in their educational activities regarding influenza and its prevention. The ISG comprises Australian and New Zealand medical and scientific specialists with an interest in influenza. The ISG is chaired by Dr Alan Hampson, former Deputy Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza. www.isg.org.au