

Influenza (the 'Flu)

Influenza (commonly called the 'flu) is caused by the Influenza A or Influenza B virus. It is very infectious. The illness usually causes high fevers; body aches and chills; a cough and fatigue.

In healthy children influenza is much like a bad cold, however it can cause more serious illness in very young children, or in those with an underlying chronic (long lasting) condition. Pregnant women are also at increased risk.

Influenza outbreaks usually occur each year from late autumn to early spring. Each year a slightly different type (strain) of the virus is responsible. For this reason the vaccine for influenza is slightly different each year.

Symptoms and Signs

Influenza usually starts with high fevers and two to three of the following symptoms:

- Aches and pains
- Headache
- Cough
- Sore throat and runny nose
- Low energy
- Nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhoea.

Symptoms are more severe than colds but usually settle within a week.

Children at Risk of Severe illness

Children who suffer from certain chronic medical problems are at increased risk of severe influenza. These include:

- Chronic lung conditions, including asthma
- Chronic heart disease
- Chronic neurological or metabolic conditions
- Chronic kidney or liver problems
- Diabetes mellitus
- A lowered immune system, due to medicines or illness

Warning signs of severe illness include poor feeding, dehydration, extreme lethargy and difficulty breathing.

Treatment

Treatment for most children with influenza involves comfort measures-

- Paracetamol or ibuprofen to ease the discomfort of fevers and body aches (avoid aspirin in children younger than 12 years)
- Rest
- Plenty of fluids

Antibiotics are not helpful in uncomplicated influenza.

Antiviral medication may be prescribed for children at risk of severe influenza, or if a family member is at risk, but is not likely to be helpful in children who are otherwise fit and healthy.

Preventing Spread of Influenza

Influenza is highly contagious- this means that it spreads very easily from person to person. The virus is present in droplets from the nose and mouth, so covering these areas when coughing or sneezing is important. Used tissues should be thrown out immediately and hands washed frequently.

Influenza is contagious from 1 day before symptoms begin until 7 days after the onset of symptoms. The time between exposure to the virus and developing the illness is about 1-4 days.



It is very important to keep your child home and away from others (ie. away from childcare, preschool, school and work) until there has been no fever for 24 hours and other symptoms are improving.

Prevention

The best way to avoid influenza is the influenza vaccine. This can be given to anyone over the age of 6 months and is strongly recommended for children with a medical condition that puts them at risk of severe influenza, and their family members.

The vaccine needs to be given every year as the influenza virus changes slightly from year to year, making last year's vaccine less effective.

When to seek medical advice

See your doctor if:

- You are concerned about your child's symptoms
- The symptoms are getting worse or are not improving after 6-7 days
- Your child is working hard to breathe or seems breathless
- Your child is confused or very drowsy
- Your child has difficulty keeping fluids down due to vomiting and is passing much less urine than usual

For more information

Paediatric Emergency Department
Women's and Children's Hospital
72 King William Road
North Adelaide SA 5006
Tel 08 8161 7044
Fax 08 8161 6750
<http://www.wch.sa.gov.au>