

Health & Fitness Tips

Flu Vaccinations - Never too late, inoculate

Got a sore throat the sniffles and a never-ending headache. Is it a cold or the flu? SQNLDR Kay Hatton explains the benefits of having a flu shot.

We call it the flu, but influenza is a highly contagious and potentially deadly disease that can be spread through coughing and sneezing.

Often confused with a bad cold, influenza can cause serious and debilitating complications such as pneumonia, particularly in the elderly and high risk groups. Accounting for 10 per cent of all workplace absenteeism associated with illness, influenza is the cause of 1500 deaths in Australia each year. Annual vaccination is the single most effective measure to prevent influenza.

Virus types

Influenza is caused by two types of viruses in humans (influenza A and B), and is spread through droplets in the air. It is highly contagious and, although symptoms take one to three days to appear after infection, it can be transmitted to others one day before symptoms appear and for five days afterwards.

Symptoms can include:

- high fever, chills and sweating,
- sore throat,
- headache,
- fatigue,
- muscle aches and pains, and
- a cough.

Recommended treatment for influenza includes:

- rest,
- plenty of fluids (though avoid alcohol), and
- paracetamol for fever, headache and muscle aches and pains.

Reducing the spread

You can reduce spread of the disease to others by washing your hands regularly, covering your mouth when coughing, avoiding social gatherings while contagious and not returning to work too early. Anti-viral medication may help if started early enough in confirmed cases of influenza.

Before you're exposed

Vaccination against influenza before exposure to the virus allows your body to build up immunity, offering 70-90 per cent protection against infection.

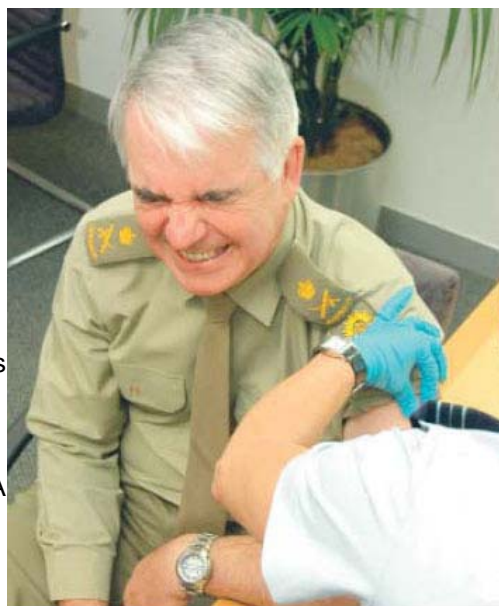
People who have been vaccinated but still contract influenza report significantly less severe symptoms for a much shorter duration.

The influenza virus is constantly changing and the vaccine is changed each year to match the circulating virus. For this reason, annual vaccination is required to provide protection against the most recent virus.

Reducing complications

To reduce the risk of life-threatening complications from influenza, medical experts recommend annual vaccination of high risk groups like the elderly, people with other health problems, such as heart and lung disease and diabetes, smokers, pregnant women and those residing in nursing homes and hostels.

Vaccination is also recommended for health care workers and those travelling or living in groups as they are at a greater risk of contracting and spreading the disease.



It's not that bad: VCDL Lt-Gen Ken Gillespie gives a mock grimace as he gets his influenza shot from Sqn-Ldr Kay Hatton. Photo by Cpl Corinne Baer

Defence personnel spend extended periods of time living and working close proximity while on deployment or exercise and when undertaking training. An outbreak of influenza in these environments would have a huge impact on operational capability and training outcomes. Flu vaccination is therefore mandatory for some deployments.

Vaccination is the single most effective way to avoid contracting influenza.

The vaccinations used in Australia are very safe, with only a small number of people at risk of serious complications. As all influenza vaccines may contain traces of egg protein, those with a significant allergy to eggs should discuss the risks with their doctor before proceeding with vaccination.

Protection develops about two weeks after the injection and lasts for up to a year.

In Australia, an annual influenza vaccine is recommended in autumn, before the winter season. In the tropics, vaccination is recommended any time of year.

As VCDF Lt-Gen Ken Gillespie said while volunteering to take the shot, "receiving the annual flu vaccination is simply a matter of common sense".

"Firstly, why wouldn't I take the opportunity to reduce my chances of contracting the flu this year?

"We're all balancing our work and family lives. I'll do everything I can to maintain my health so that I can continue to meet my work commitments while still making the most of my family time. I also don't want to risk my family's health by taking home flu that I've picked up at work," Lt- Gen Gillespie said.

"Secondly, this is a busy year for Defence. While delivering our normal quality, high operational tempo outputs, we're also working very hard to meet all of Defence's White Paper requirements. But we can't complete these tasks without a fully functioning team, and it doesn't make sense to needlessly lose team members to the flu. I encourage all Defence personnel, uniformed and civilian, to take the time to protect themselves against the flu. It costs you nothing and makes great personal and professional sense."