

## **Motto: Regardless of age or health, no one is flu-proof**

- This season's dominant flu strain in North America is the H1N1 virus, the same one that struck in 2009, with high rates of hospitalisation and death among young adults and the middle aged, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- The virus responsible for the 2009 pandemic has also been responsible for widespread outbreaks in Canada and the USA this past northern hemisphere winter, with much of the disease burden in younger adults.
- An estimated 60 per cent of those who have died from influenza in the US this season were 24 to 64 years old, compared with 18 per cent last season, according to the CDC<sup>1</sup>.
- While influenza is often most severe in the elderly and very young, the ages most affected varied depending the circulating viruses. The H1N1 pandemic virus has consistently had its greatest impact in the younger adult group. This is a concern because a recent ISG survey had shown that people under 65 years of age, with various conditions putting them at serious risk if they contract influenza, are still not being vaccinated and are not aware of the risks that they face<sup>2</sup>.
- The Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) estimates that a quarter or more of the Australian population, many in the younger age groups, could face an increased risk of severe complication when contracting influenza this flu season<sup>3</sup>, yet only 30-40 per cent of people in this high risk category are being immunised<sup>4</sup>.
- People tend to think of the flu as an illness that afflicts the elderly. In fact, 31 per cent of people under 65 are not aware that they are at an increased risk of developing severe complications because of an underlying medical condition if they contract the flu<sup>5</sup>.
- Those at greater risk of complications include: people with heart conditions, asthma and respiratory conditions, type 1 or type 2 diabetes, kidney disease, impaired immunity and neuromuscular disorders, or those who smoke, are obese, pregnant, aged over 65, or of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.
- In addition, those who are young and healthy are not immune. This past flu season in the United States has hit hard on young and middle-aged adults, with the majority of influenza-associated hospitalisations (61.6%) occurring in those 18 to 64 years old<sup>6</sup>.
- Historically, what occurs in the northern hemisphere winter reflects influenza activity in Australia, so it's a timely reminder that even the young and healthy should get flu shots.
- It is important for people to be immunised annually as the vaccine usually gets updated each year because influenza viruses change, and this is the case for the 2014 vaccine. In addition, during the course of a year, a person's immunity reduces by 50 per cent or more, so regardless of the changes it's important to keep boosting your immunity.
- The predominant virus in the US this past flu season was H1N1, the same virus that was responsible for the global influenza pandemic in 2009.

## Flu facts

### **In Australia flu causes:**

- 1,500 – 3,500 deaths annually — that’s more than the road toll, depending on the severity of the season
- 18,000 extra hospitalisations annually
- 300,000 extra GP visits annually
- Millions of dollars in healthcare and workplace productivity costs

An estimated 15 per cent of adults and 30 per cent (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 each year. 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 eight hours on hard surfaces such as a traffic light button, a telephone, a 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 three-for-one 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 hospitalisation and death.

### ***Is it free?***

***YES: At UNSW from June 2014 the Flu vaccine is free to all students and staff.***

Flu vaccine is also 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 six 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 six months to 10 years on long-term aspirin therapy.

### **About the Influenza Specialist Group**

The Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) is a not-for-profit organisation 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.

**For more information on the flu, the vaccine and how to protect yourself visit:** [www.flusmart.org.au](http://www.flusmart.org.au)

**For more information on ISG, visit:** <http://www.isg.org.au/index.php/publications>