

Treating pandemic influenza

Community information

This fact sheet provides information about treating pandemic influenza.

Do I have the flu?

The most prominent characteristics of influenza (flu) are sudden appearance of a high fever (38 degrees Celsius or more), a dry cough and body aches, especially in the head, lower back and legs. Usually you will feel extremely weak and tired and won't want to get out of bed.

Other symptoms can be chills, aching behind the eyes, loss of appetite, a sore throat and a runny or stuffy nose. Having the flu is even more likely if you have been in contact with someone who already has it, or have had some other type of exposure such as overseas travel to areas where flu outbreaks are occurring.

What to expect with the flu:

- Day 1–3: Sudden appearance of fever, headache, muscle pain and weakness, dry cough, sore throat and sometimes a stuffy nose.
- Day 4: Fever and muscle aches decrease. Hoarse, dry or sore throat, cough and possible mild chest discomfort become more noticeable. You may feel tired or flat.
- Day 8: Symptoms decrease. Cough and tiredness may last one to two weeks or more.

What medications should I take?

There may be a limited supply of influenza antiviral medications during a pandemic. The Australian Government will provide information about the availability of these medications during a pandemic and will ensure that those who most need them will have access. These medications are only effective if you start taking them within the first 24 to 48 hours of illness. It is important to seek medical attention early so that antivirals can be started immediately when indicated.

Tips for buying over-the-counter medication:

- It is better to buy a remedy that treats only one symptom; this way you are not taking in substances that you do not need, or that may trigger an adverse reaction.
- Read the label to be sure that the ingredient treats your symptoms.
- Long-acting medications tend to have more side effects than short-acting medications.
- Read the label and note any possible side effects or interactions with other drugs or health conditions.
- If you have a chronic illness and are taking prescription medications, ask the pharmacist or your doctor to suggest a medication that would be safe for you to take.
- Older people are much more sensitive to medications in general and may experience more side effects, especially to the nervous system, such as confusion.
- If you have any questions at all about medications, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

What are the best things I can do to look after myself?

- Rest - You will probably feel very weak and tired until your temperature returns to normal (about three days), and resting will provide comfort and allow your body to use its energy to fight the infection.
- Stay at home - You should stay away from work/school and avoid contact with others as much as possible while the infection is contagious. The period during which people over 12 years of age can spread the infection is around seven days from when the first symptoms appear.
- Drink plenty of fluids - Extra fluids are needed to replace those lost because of the fever (through sweating). If your urine is dark, you need to drink more. Try to drink a glass of fluids, such as water, every hour while you are awake.

Other useful tips to help you recover from influenza:

- Take simple analgesics such as paracetamol or ibuprofen as directed on the packet, to ease muscle pain and bring down your fever (unless your doctor says otherwise).
- Children under 18 years of age should not take any medications that contain aspirin. The combination of influenza and aspirin in children has been known to cause Reye syndrome, a very serious condition affecting the nervous system and liver.
- Antibiotics are not effective against influenza because influenza is a virus and antibiotics fight bacteria. However, your doctor may prescribe them if you develop a bacterial infection on top of your influenza.
- Gargle with a glass of warm water to ease a sore throat. Sugar-free lollies or lozenges also help.
- A hot water bottle or heating pad may also relieve muscle pain. A warm bath may be soothing.
- Use saline nose drops or spray to help soothe or clear a stuffy nose. Decongestants help shrink swollen blood vessels in the nose. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about which medication will be the best one for you.
- Do not smoke - this will irritate your damaged airways.
- A cough can be helpful if it gets rid of mucus.
- Try warm moist air inhalation. Boil a kettle and put the water in a bowl on a table. Put your head over the bowl with a towel over your head and inhale the warm air for up to 20 minutes. Don't put anything in the water.
- Ask for help if you live alone, are a single parent, or are responsible for the care of someone who is frail or disabled. You may need to call someone to help you until you are feeling better.
- Remember, if you buy medicine at the pharmacy to treat your symptoms (over-the-counter medications), check with the pharmacist to see if it is the best one for you. Mention if you have a chronic illness or are taking any other medication.

Further information

Better Health Channel

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Department of Health and Human Services:

www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza

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