

MEDIA RELEASE

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JOIN THE FLU FIGHTERS THIS WINTER

The Facts about the Flu Vaccination and the best time to get it!

We all dread the flu season, but when is the best time for you to get the influenza vaccination and why? The Sydney North Health Network has interviewed local health professionals and a young patient to uncover the facts about the flu vaccination and the best time to get it.

We already know that annual vaccination before the onset of each influenza season is strongly recommended and the typical period of influenza circulation in New South Wales is June to September.

“I get my flu shot every year in April or May to prevent getting all of the symptoms and missing out on work if I get sick. I think it’s a good thing to do to completely shut it down before you have any potential of actually getting the flu. I get my flu shot every year from my local GP,” says our patient Kate who is 20 years of age and works full time.

“The best time to have the flu vaccination has changed recently. People are used to having the flu vaccine in early Autumn, but we think that the maximum benefit only lasts 3 to 4 months, so we are now recommending that people delay to around late-April to mid-May to get their flu vaccinations each year,” says General Practitioner Dr Peter Brennan.

“In 2017 we had a really bad flu year in New South Wales. There were in fact 653 deaths in 2017 caused by influenza across the state. We had a much better year in 2018 with 39 deaths across the state and we believe this was due to improved public awareness about the benefits of the flu vaccine,” says Dr Clare Skinner – Director of Emergency Medicine at Hornsby & Ku-ring-gai Hospital.

Influenza vaccinations can take approximately 7-10 days to generate some immunity. It’s not an instant protection, so it does require a bit of pre-planning.

“It is good practice to pre-plan your flu vac because of the delay between vaccination and immunity. It can be potentially too late to vaccinate if you have started to develop symptoms of the flu. Then the vaccine is not going to protect you. However, at any stage otherwise people should be thinking about influenza protection because it is such a widespread condition that does cause a lot of illness and complications,” says Dr Brennan.

Did you know that you can also receive your flu vaccination in pharmacies as well?

“I believe it was introduced so that patients could get better access to flu vaccines. Pharmacies are open longer hours, are readily accessible for most people, and it is quite affordable for people to be able to access the flu vaccines and protect themselves and, their potentially more vulnerable, family members against the dreaded flu,” says local pharmacist Scott Walters.

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“Not every pharmacist can provide a flu vaccination. Pharmacists need to go through an accredited course before they can administer a flu shot. You will know that your pharmacist is accredited to give you the flu vaccination by a certificate that you will see displayed in the consultation room where you receive your vaccination,” informs Scott. Find out more at www.findapharmacy.com.au

The groups in the community who are at greatest risk from influenza are the aged population (people 65 and over), children under 5 years of age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over 15 years of age, and people who have significant other medical complications such as chronic lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, kidney failure or other conditions that render them vulnerable.

“People with cancer or immune conditions are also at quite high risk. And the surprising group are pregnant women. If they get influenza there can be significant complications so it is especially important that they seek immunisation early,” says Dr Skinner

“Influenza can be a very serious illness. The flu is very different to common cold. It comes with a fever, aches and pains and it can come with complications such as pneumonia, respiratory distress and confusion. We’ve had long-term disabilities and deaths from influenza – especially in high-risk groups such people requiring intensive care. People can also end up on long term ventilation from influenza and that is extremely serious. But we have a great tool to prevent it happening with the flu vaccine,” continues Dr Skinner.

There are a number of groups in our community for whom the flu vaccination is provided free by the Commonwealth and State Government. All people aged 65 and over are entitled to a free influenza vaccine, as are children 5 years and under, people who have an underlying chronic disease at any age, pregnant women, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. The flu vaccine is also completely safe to be given to women during pregnancy.

“There is a common perception that people can get influenza after getting the vaccine, which is really not possible. The flu vaccine is a dead virus that cannot generate an illness. I often say to a patient who says they got influenza from the flu vaccine; they probably got it from the person they were sitting next to in the waiting room. They definitely didn’t catch it from the flu vax,” says Dr Brennan.

“You don’t always need to come to the emergency department if you have flu symptoms. You can see your GP or call the Health Direct line on **1800 022 222**. The EDs get very busy in winter and you will find that people are crowded and close together in the space and the last thing you want is for people to be infecting each other in the emergency department environment. Of course, if you are really worried – for example if you are having chest pains or difficulty breathing or are confused – you should come to emergency and we’re here to help if you need us,” concludes Dr Skinner.

Finally, when the flu season hits, it is important to apply good flu hygiene habits. That means washing your hands regularly; if you need to cough or sneeze cover your mouth; and if you are sick you should also stay at home. Please don’t go into school, university or work. Be kind and keep your influenza to yourself, and seek appropriate treatment from your local GP or pharmacist.

It is never too late to vaccinate since influenza can circulate all year round. Vaccination should continue to be offered as long as influenza viruses are circulating and a valid vaccine (before expiration date) is available.

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