

Seasonal/Avian/Pandemic influenza (flu)

Information for the general public

What is seasonal influenza?

The influenza virus circulates every year and causes an infectious disease known as influenza (flu). Symptoms of the flu include: sudden fever, headache, muscle aches and pains, fatigue, cough, sore throat, stuffy or runny nose. The virus can cause a mild or severe illness depending on the type of influenza virus and the age and general health of the affected person. When you catch the flu it may take three days to show any symptoms and these may last up to a week.

How do you catch seasonal influenza?

The flu is easily spread through tiny droplets that are released through talking, coughing and sneezing. The droplets containing the virus may infect someone else by coming into contact with their eyes, mouth or nose. These droplets can also land on and contaminate surfaces, such as tables, cups, pens and toys. Someone else may then become infected by handling the contaminated object and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

Preventing seasonal influenza

Every year you can ask your doctor to vaccinate you against the flu. As the influenza virus changes frequently, you will need to get vaccinated every year to maintain your immunity. Good health hygiene habits can greatly reduce the chance that you will get the flu or pass it on to others. You should always cough

and sneeze into a disposable tissue and wash your hands afterwards. If you have the flu, you should avoid public places and close contact with others, especially children.

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza viruses are influenza viruses that usually only infect birds. Very rarely, an avian influenza virus can also infect people. The current avian influenza virus subtype, called H5N1, can infect both birds and people. This happens from having close contact with avian influenza-infected birds, their excretions or their environment. Avian influenza in people causes severe flu-like symptoms and may result in death. Transmission of avian influenza from one person to another is extremely rare.

What measures are in place to prevent avian influenza in Australia?

To date, there have been no reports of avian influenza in birds or people in Australia and the Australian Government has many measures in place to prevent the emergence of avian influenza in Australia. It is very unlikely that anyone entering Australia with avian influenza will pass the disease to another person. But people who have arrived from overseas or travelled to countries where there are reports of avian influenza in birds or people should monitor their health carefully for seven (7) days after they

return (for other severe respiratory diseases this period of monitoring may be longer). They should immediately contact a doctor if they feel unwell with fever or flu-like symptoms and they should inform the doctor about their travels.

Why are health authorities worried about avian influenza?

The World Health Organization is worried that an avian influenza virus and a human influenza virus might mix and result in a new strain of influenza virus that can be easily passed from person to person. This might trigger an 'influenza pandemic', where the disease spreads rapidly around the world, infecting many people.

What are the symptoms? How soon do symptoms start? How long does it last?

The exact symptoms, incubation period and duration of avian influenza in people is not known, because there have not been enough cases. The most common symptoms for people infected with the avian influenza virus are similar to those for people infected with human influenza virus, although the severity of the illness may differ. Symptoms generally appear three to seven days after exposure and can last up to seven days. People with avian influenza are infectious for at least seven (7) days (children are infectious for up to 21 days).

What about an influenza pandemic?

An influenza pandemic can occur when a new strain of influenza virus appears that can easily spread from person to person, and to which we have little or no natural immunity. It is impossible to predict where and when an influenza pandemic might begin. There are steps in place to prevent pandemic influenza from occurring in Australia. In the event of an influenza pandemic, good respiratory hygiene habits that reduce the spread of seasonal influenza will also reduce the spread of pandemic influenza. These are simple things you can do, like covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, avoid touching your face with your hands and washing your hands regularly.

Do you need more information?

For more information or advice, contact the Communicable Disease Control Unit on 1300 651 160.

- Department of Human Services:
<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pandemicinfluenza/>
- Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing:
www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/Pandemic+Influenza-1
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade:
<http://www.dfat.gov.au/>
- World Health Organization:
http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/index.html
- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (USA):
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>