

# Influenza

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## Description

Influenza ('the flu') is a viral disease of the respiratory tract, characterised by fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and pains, a head cold and a mild sore throat. It can often cause a severe cough. The infected person usually recovers within 2–7 days.

## How does it spread?

Influenza is very infectious. It can spread through the air by coughing and sneezing, as well as by hands, cups and other objects that have been in contact with an infected person's mouth or nose.

## Incubation period

The incubation period is usually 1–3 days.

## Infectious period

In adults, the infectious period is probably from 1 day before the onset of symptoms to 3–5 days from the onset of symptoms. For young children, the infectious period is 7–10 days.<sup>35</sup>

## Exclusion period

People with influenza should stay at home until they are feeling well.

## Responsibilities of educators and other staff

- Advise the parent to keep the child home until they are feeling well.
- If an educator or other staff member is ill, they should stay at home until they are feeling well.
- Make sure staff and children practise cough and sneeze etiquette and effective hand hygiene.
- Ensure that appropriate cleaning practices are being followed in the education and care service.

## Responsibilities of parents

- Keep the child at home until they are feeling well.
- Encourage cough and sneeze etiquette and effective hand hygiene at home.

## Controlling the spread of infection

- Annual vaccination is available against influenza. People need to be vaccinated every year because immunity decreases, and new influenza strains circulate each year.
- Teach children about cough and sneeze etiquette.
  - Cough or sneeze into your inner elbow rather than your hand.
  - If you used a tissue to cover your nose or mouth when sneezing or coughing, put the tissue in the bin straight away.
  - Clean your hands.
- Ensure that staff practise cough and sneeze etiquette and hand hygiene.
- Ensure that appropriate cleaning practices are being followed.

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<sup>35</sup> 'Influenza', in DL Heymann (ed.) 2008, *Control of communicable diseases manual*, 19th edn, American Public Health Association, Washington, DC, p. 318; Communicable Diseases Network Australia 2011, *Influenza infection: CDNA guidelines for public health units*, CDNA, Canberra.

## Treatment

There is no specific treatment for influenza. Because it is caused by a virus, antibiotics will not help treat influenza. However, antibiotics may be prescribed if the person has a secondary infection or complication that is caused by bacteria.

Decongestants and other cold remedies are widely promoted for relieving the symptoms of colds, but they are unlikely to help. In fact, they can cause side effects such as irritability, confusion and sleepiness. Oral decongestants are not recommended for children under the age of 2 years. Cough medicines do not reduce the frequency, severity or duration of a cough. The cough is there for a reason: it serves a useful function in clearing mucus from the child's airways and preventing secondary infection. If you are concerned, take the child to a doctor.

Do not give aspirin to any child under the age of 12 years unless specifically recommended by a doctor.