



Seasonal Influenza – Schools factsheet

What is influenza?

- Influenza or 'flu' is a viral infection that mainly affects the nose, throat and the lungs.
- There are two main types of flu that cause infection; influenza A and influenza B. Influenza A is usually a more severe infection than influenza B. Influenza B tends to occur most often in children but it can affect any age.

Who catches influenza?

- Anyone can catch flu; the highest rates of infection are usually in school age children. Most influenza infections occur during the winter months.
- The amount and severity of illness occurring each year varies, depending on the particular strain that is circulating.

How do you catch influenza?

- Influenza is mostly caught by breathing in air containing the virus when an infected person coughs/sneezes or by touching a surface where the virus has landed and then touching your mouth or nose.

How infectious is influenza?

- Influenza is infectious and can spread rapidly from person to person. Some strains of virus are more infectious than others, or cause more severe illness.

What is influenza like?

- Influenza is worse than an ordinary cold. It usually starts suddenly with a high fever over 38.0°C which can last for 3-4 days. A dry cough, headaches and chills are common as are general muscle aches and pains. A stuffy nose, sneezing and a sore throat can also be present. The fever tends to decrease after the second day when a stuffy nose and a sore throat become more noticeable. Some children may also feel sick (nausea), or have diarrhoea. Tiredness can last 2-3 weeks.

How serious is influenza?

- Most people recover completely from influenza in a matter of days or a week. For others, for example older people, pregnant women, those with other illnesses (such as chest or heart disease, or diabetes) and newborn babies, influenza can be a serious illness.
- Serious illness from influenza can be caused by the virus itself causing a severe lung infection, through a secondary bacterial infection of the airways or lungs, or by worsening of any underlying long-term medical condition such as heart disease.

How is influenza treated?

- Most people with the flu need no special treatment. Influenza is caused by a virus so antibiotics do not help unless there is a complication. Occasionally a special 'antiviral' medicine is prescribed for people in the 'at risk' groups or whose illness is getting worse.
- Someone who is ill with flu should keep warm, rest and drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration.
- Paracetamol can be given to reduce fever and aches. Aspirin must NOT be given to children under 16 years of age as it has been associated with the development of a severe neurological disorder called Reye's syndrome.
- It is best to stay at home while feeling ill with influenza as this reduces the chance of spreading the infection to others.

Can you prevent influenza?

- Vaccination can protect against flu. Each year a new vaccine has to be produced to protect against the flu viruses expected to be in circulation that winter and to boost the immune response.
- The vaccine is very safe. Side effects are usually mild, such as a sore arm.
- The vaccine is given in the autumn before the flu season begins. It is not recommended for everyone, but it is advisable for those likely to spread infection or be more seriously affected by influenza. This includes:
 - All 2-4 year olds and children in school years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5
 - People of any age with chronic heart, lung, neurological, metabolic disorders (including severe asthma and diabetes), kidney problems or a lowered immune system due to treatment or disease
 - Pregnant women
 - Everyone aged 65 years and over
- People under the age of 65 years who are not in one of the groups mentioned above are not offered the vaccine as part of the national programme.
- This list is not exhaustive and if anyone is unsure if they should have the vaccine, then they should discuss with their GP.

How can you reduce the risk of influenza transmission in schools?

- Advise that children and staff that are ill stay away from school – they should remain off until they are symptom free.
- Wash hands frequently with soap and water and dry thoroughly.
- Avoid touching surfaces (such as door handles) and then the face.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and dispose of used/dirty tissues in a bin – "Catch it, Bin it, Kill it".

How soon should a child/staff be back at school after influenza?

- Influenza is most infectious when symptoms start until about 3-5 days later. Children and staff should only return once they are symptoms free.