

Doctors' Voice

March – April 2014

Influenza - 'The Flu'

Influenza (the flu) is caused by a virus. The flu is more than just a bad cold and can occasionally lead to serious complications, including death. Symptoms include high fever, sore throat, weakness, headache, muscle and joint pains and a cough. Treatment includes bed rest and drinking plenty of fluids. Vulnerable people are more likely to develop serious complications including pneumonia. Immunisation can offer protection from flu.

Influenza is caused by a highly contagious virus that is spread by contact with fluids from coughs and sneezes. Every year, the flu causes widespread illness in the community. Annual immunisation is recommended for older people and other people who are at risk of serious complications from the flu, such as pneumonia.

An influenza epidemic occurs when an outbreak of the illness is widespread in a certain community. A pandemic occurs when the illness is more geographically widespread and on more than one continent. Influenza epidemics occur, on average, every three years whereas pandemics have occurred only four times in the past 100 years.

The flu virus has a unique ability to change its surface structure. This means that people's immune systems might not be able to effectively fight the new version of the flu that circulates each season (known as seasonal flu). This can cause widespread illness (epidemics and pandemics). For this reason, people who are at risk of complications should be immunised each year. Most cases of influenza occur within a six- to eight-week period during winter and spring.

Flu is not the common cold

The flu is more severe than a bad cold because:

- Cold symptoms last from two to a few days, whereas the flu can last up to a week.
- The flu causes a high fever, whereas a cold sometimes causes only a mild fever.
- Muscular pains and shivering attacks occur with the flu, but not with a cold.
- Colds cause a runny nose, while the flu usually starts with a dry sensation in the nose and throat.

Flu vaccinations for 2015 – delay in supply to general practices

The start of the seasonal flu vaccination program will be postponed this year because of manufacturing delays to develop the vaccine.

Supplies to general practices will be delayed. Please speak with practice staff to see when supplies will be available.



Flu vaccinations

Influenza, or flu, causes widespread illness every year. Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high-risk groups including people over 65, sick people in hospital, hospital staff members, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, pregnant women, residents in nursing homes or other care facilities, people with severe asthma and anyone with a chronic illness. Serious side effects or allergic reactions to the vaccine are rare.

Things to remember

- Influenza is a viral disease that causes widespread illness every year.
- Immunising people who are at risk of complications from the flu is the most important way we have to reduce the number of flu infections and deaths.
- Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high-risk groups.
- People who work or live with people who are at risk of serious complications should also be immunised to avoid spreading the flu.
- The vaccine **cannot give you a dose of flu** because it does not contain any live virus.

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Coeliac Disease and Gluten Sensitivity



Coeliac disease (pronounced SEE-lee-ak) is a significant medical condition that can cause serious problems if it is not diagnosed and treated properly. It is an immune disease caused by gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, barley, triticale (a hybrid of rye and wheat) and oats. When a person with coeliac disease eats gluten, an inappropriate immune reaction causes inflammation and damage to their small bowel (intestine). A lifelong gluten-free diet is the only treatment.

Malnutrition, osteoporosis, depression, infertility and a small (but real) increased risk of certain forms of cancer, such as lymphoma of the small bowel, are just some of the problems that can develop if coeliac disease is left untreated. Coeliac disease affects at least one in 70 Australians.

Even small amounts of gluten can cause harm. The only treatment is to avoid all gluten-containing foods. This allows the bowel lining to recover.

Symptoms of Coeliac Disease

The symptoms of coeliac disease can range from severe to minor, and may even go undetected. Some symptoms can be wrongly confused with irritable bowel syndrome or a sensitivity to wheat or other food, while other symptoms may be put down to stress or getting older.

The most common symptoms in adults include:

- anaemia
- bloating and flatulence
- diarrhoea or constipation
- fatigue, weakness and lethargy
- nausea and vomiting
- stomach cramps
- weight loss – although weight gain is possible.



Food Labelling and Gluten

All packaged foods have an ingredient list printed on the label. There are four methods of finding suitable gluten-free foods, which include:

- foods that are naturally gluten free, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, and fresh unprocessed meats
- foods carrying the Coeliac Australia Endorsement logo
- foods labelled 'gluten free'
- foods made for the general markets that are gluten free by ingredient.

To assist in identifying gluten free foods, there are a range of apps available through an internet search.

Coeliac awareness week is 13-20 March. Visit www.coeliac.org.au

Food Allergy and Intolerance

Food allergy is an immune response, while food intolerance is a chemical reaction. Food intolerance does not involve the immune system and does not cause severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis). Symptoms of food allergy include wheezing, stomach upsets and skin rashes. The most common food allergens include cow's milk, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, shellfish, fish, sesame, wheat and soy products. Anaphylaxis is a **severe allergic reaction** and can be life threatening.

Food allergy is increasing

Allergies in general are on the increase worldwide and food allergies have also become more common, particularly peanut allergy in preschool children. About 60 per cent of allergies appear during the first year of life. Cow's milk allergy is one of the most common in early childhood. Most children grow out of it before they start school.

Tips to avoid foods that may cause allergies

To avoid allergic foods, learn the terms used to describe these foods on food labels, for example:

- milk protein – milk, non-fat milk solids, cheese, yoghurt, caseinates, whey, lactose
- lactose – milk, lactose
- egg – eggs, egg albumen, egg yolk, egg lecithin
- gluten – wheat, barley, rye, triticale, wheat bran, malt, oats, cornflour, oat bran
- soy – soybeans, hydrolysed vegetable protein, soy protein isolate, soy lecithin
- salicylates – strawberries, tomatoes.

For more information, discuss with your doctor or dietitian.