

# Influenza: Factsheet for Schools

## What is influenza?

- Influenza or 'flu' is an infection caused by a virus. It affects mainly the nose, throat and the lungs.
- There are 3 broad types of influenza virus: A, B and C. Most outbreaks of influenza are caused by type A viruses. These viruses are constantly changing so that different strains predominate from year to year.
- Many people who say (or are told) that they have 'flu' in fact have a bad cold. Usually what people call "gastric flu" is a gastrointestinal infection with another virus such as norovirus.

## Who catches influenza?

- Anyone can catch flu; the highest rates of infection are often in school age children.
- Most influenza infections occur during the winter months.
- The amount of illness occurring each year varies and depends largely on how many people are susceptible to that particular virus; this, in turn, depends on whether people have been infected with that, or a similar, virus in the past. If the new viruses differ greatly from previous ones, the population will not have much immunity. Some influenza viruses cause more severe illness than others. Hence in some winters people may have worse disease than in other years.

## How do you catch influenza?

- Influenza is mostly caught by breathing in air containing the virus. The virus is passed into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by touching surfaces eg table tops that someone has recently coughed or sneezed over and then putting fingers into mouth/nose or rubbing eyes.

## How infectious is influenza?

- Influenza is highly infectious and can spread very rapidly from person to person. Some strains of virus seem more infectious than others, or cause more severe illness. What is influenza like?

## What is influenza like?

- Influenza is worse than an ordinary cold. It usually starts suddenly with a high fever of 38.9-40.0oC (102-104oF) which lasts 3-4 days. Headaches, chills and a dry cough are common as are general muscle aches and pains which can be severe. A stuffy nose, sneezing and a sore throat can also be present. The fever tends to decrease after the second day when nasal congestion and a sore throat become more noticeable. Some children may also feel sick (nausea), or have vomiting and 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 the elderly, 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 is usually not due to the flu itself, but to secondary bacterial infections causing lung infections (bronchitis and pneumonia) or to a worsening of underlying chronic medical condition such as heart disease.

## Can you prevent influenza?

- There is a vaccine against flu. Each year a new vaccine has to be produced to protect against the flu viruses expected to be in circulation that winter. How effective the vaccine will be depends on how well the vaccine strains match the strains of flu that actually circulate that year.
- The vaccine is very safe and side effects are uncommon and usually mild. 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 be more seriously affected by influenza. This includes:
  - People of any age with chronic heart, lung and metabolic disorders (including severe asthma and diabetes). People of any age with kidney problems, or a lowered immune system due to treatment or disease and chronic liver disease (added this year).
  - Everyone aged 65 years and over.
  - Those in long stay residential care accommodation where influenza, once introduced, may spread rapidly.
  - It is recommended that immunisation be offered to certain health care workers involved in the direct care of and/or support to patients. Social service employers have also been asked to consider offering immunisation to certain staff involved in the direct care of and/or support to clients, and carers (added this year).
  - Children and fit adults under the age of 65 years who are not in one of the groups mentioned above are not recommended to receive vaccine.
  - These same groups of people also need to have the pneumococcal vaccine, which offers protection against the commonest form of pneumonia and other conditions. This vaccine is given once only except in special circumstances.

## How can spread of the illness be limited?

- Keep sick children at home. They should not return to school until they have been better for at least 48 hours.
- Keep coughs and sneezes covered with a tissue (or at least put hand up in front of mouth). Dispose of the tissue in a rubbish bin.
- Remind children not to touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. The viruses that cause these illnesses are spread in this way
- Make sure hands are washed and dried well after sneezing, wiping or blowing the nose; going to the toilet; and before eating and preparing food.

## **How soon should a child be back at school after influenza?**

- Influenza is most infectious from about a day before symptoms start until about 3 days later. The DfEE/DH guidelines on infection control in schools and nurseries give no recommended time of exclusion for an infected child: a child should return once they are well enough usually 48 hrs after they feel better.

## **How can you treat someone with influenza?**

- 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 will be given.
- It is best to stay at home while feeling ill with influenza as this also reduces the chance of spreading the infection to others.
- The patient should rest and drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration. Paracetamol or Ibuprofen can be given to reduce the fever; Aspirin must NOT be given to children as it has been associated rarely with the development of a severe neurological disorder called Reye’s syndrome.