

Asthma and Flu



An information sheet for general practitioners

Influenza, or the flu, is a highly contagious viral infection that is responsible for major outbreaks of respiratory illness. In 2016, more than 90,000 Australians suffered from influenza.¹

Influenza has a significant impact on the community, each year flu contributes to an estimated 13,500 hospitalisations and more than 3,000 deaths in Australians aged over 50 years.²

The virus can cause serious illness, particularly in people with underlying medical conditions, such as asthma.

The flu and other viral infections are the most common trigger for asthma flare-ups.

People with asthma are at higher risk of experiencing severe complications following the influenza virus. Such complications include:

- More severe asthma flare-ups
- Pneumonia, bronchitis and ear infections
- Days lost from work and school
- Hospitalisation and death

Children with asthma

In 2016, children aged 0-5 had the 2nd highest flu rate, second to those over 75.³ Each year 20-50% of children catch flu, compared with 10-30% of adults⁴, placing children with asthma at higher risk of severe symptoms due to flu. The flu vaccine is recommended from 6 months of age.

The National Immunisation Program offers the vaccine free to eligible patients but this does not cover all people with asthma.

Asthma Australia recommends that people with asthma receive the influenza vaccine to protect them and prevent the spread of the virus to those most at risk.

Annual vaccination is the single most effective way to protect against influenza infection. Vaccination in mid-April is advised to maintain protection throughout flu season.

Role of General Practitioners

Doctors have a significant role in the management of asthma in the community. This is an important opportunity to raise awareness of flu vaccination and in particular:

- Identify patients with asthma who are at increased risk of influenza complications
- Encourage patients with asthma and their families to consider annual influenza vaccination
- Provide information on the benefits of vaccination for people with asthma who are at risk of more severe complications
- Answer questions and address any concerns regarding influenza vaccination

In 2016, 55% of people who were immunised against flu based this decision on their GP's recommendation⁵. This shows the potential of GPs to influence patients who may not otherwise choose vaccination, and help protect people with asthma.

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contact your Local Asthma Foundation on:

1800 ASTHMA
1800 278462