Influenza

The Disease

Influenza A and B are the two strains of influenza viruses responsible for causing human upper respiratory disease. Classic symptoms of influenza include fever, lethargy, muscle aches and pains and a cough. Antibiotics are ineffective against the virus causing the infection.

Where is it found?

Epidemics of influenza occur during the winter and spring months in most years. Influenza virus infections cause disease in all age groups. Rates of infection are highest among children, but rates of serious illness and death are highest among the elderly and persons of any age who have medical conditions that place them at high risk for complications. Influenza viruses also can cause global epidemics of disease, or pandemics, during which rates of severe illness and death from influenza-related complications can increase dramatically.

Risk to travellers

The risk for exposure to influenza during travel to foreign countries varies depending on the time of year and destination. In the tropics, influenza can occur throughout the year. In the southern hemisphere, most activity occurs from April through September. In the northern hemisphere peak activity occurs from November through March. Recommendations for travellers to countries experiencing avian influenza outbreaks can be found at smartraveller.gov.au

In recent years, influenza strains originating in birds have sickened humans in various parts of the globe including China, Indonesia and Egypt. Fortunately, transmission of the viruses between humans has been rare to date; however the possibility of a mutation of the viruses allowing for further spread remains. Travellers to areas affected by avian influenza outbreaks are advised to: avoid animal markets, don’t touch animals/birds, eat only well-cooked chicken & eggs and practice good personal hygiene.

Travelvax recommends vaccination for travellers who:

- are over 65 years of age.
- pregnant women
- have a chronic heart or lung condition.
- travel with large tourist groups (particularly trains, buses, cruise ships).
- business travellers who wish to avoid lost time.

NB - Vaccination is recommended every 12 months. If travelling to a different hemisphere, the types or strains of flu virus circulating may differ from the hemisphere from which you have travelled. If you have been vaccinated recently against influenza, it is advisable to check if the strain of the virus at your destination is covered by the vaccine you have received.

Vaccination

Type:

- Inactivated virus vaccine (trivalent) – intramuscular (Fluvax, Influvac,Vaxigrip, Fluarix, Agrippal)
- Inactivated virus vaccine (quadrivalent) – intramuscular (FluQuadri Adult and Junior, FluarixTetra)

**Standard Schedule:**
- Single dose
- For infants & children aged 6 months to 10 years who have never had the vaccine before: 2 doses at least 4 weeks apart.

**Contraindications:** Should not be administered to individuals who have previously experienced a serious reaction to this vaccine or those with known anaphylactic hypersensitivity reactions to egg proteins (eggs or egg products), chicken proteins or other components of the vaccine, including traces (these vary depending on vaccine brand i.e. formaldehyde).

**Level of protection:**
- 6 to 9 months protection against main influenza viruses each season. (Will not protect against the common cold viruses.)

**Possible side effects:**
- Usually infrequent and mild
- Soreness at the injection site
- 15-20% may experience fever, lethargy and muscle aches.

**NB: contrary to popular myth, the influenza vaccine cannot cause influenza.**
As with all vaccines, there is a small risk of allergic reaction.

Personal protective measures include (non-pharmaceutical)

1. Avoid close contact with sick people
   - a) stay at least 1 meter away from someone who is unwell or in crowded conditions
   - b) if you are unable to stay away, then reduce the time spent with the person who is unwell
   - c) don’t needlessly visit sick individuals

2. Wash or clean your hands frequently
   - a) Washing and disinfecting your hands will help you protect yourself against the virus
   - b) Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds, not just a quick rinse and wash
   - c) After washing with soap and water thoroughly dry your hands with single use paper or air dryer

3. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth
   - a) Touching your eyes, nose and mouth after you have touched contaminated surfaces or articles can spread the virus
4. Protecting others if you are sick
   a) Maintain good respiratory hygiene: that is cover your mouth and nose using tissues when coughing or sneezing, cough into your arm rather than your hands
   b) Frequently clean and wash your hands – as above
   c) Stay away from work or school and limit your social contact

5. Face masks
   a) Wearing surgical-type masks during the influenza season or an epidemic offers little protection and is not recommended
   b) If a face mask is used it needs to be discarded appropriately and should be used in combination with the above recommendations

More information on Influenza is available during your pre-travel consultation with Travelvax. Call 1300 360 164 for the location of the clinic nearest to you.