



Australian Government

Department of Health

Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) information for individuals and families on the influenza vaccines available in 2016

This document outlines the advice of the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) on the use of influenza vaccines that are available in Australia in 2016. ATAGI members include immunisation and infectious disease experts from around Australia. More information on ATAGI can be found on the [Immunise Australia website](#).¹

What is the flu?

The flu (influenza) is caused by the influenza virus. It is spread from person to person by coughing and sneezing and causes a wide range of symptoms, usually a cough, fever and muscle aches (often confused with symptoms caused by other viruses). The flu can cause serious illness leading to hospitalisation or death, even in previously healthy people. There are two main types of influenza virus that infect humans and are responsible for seasonal flu each year: influenza A and influenza B. Both type A and type B flu viruses have different strains or lineages and these can change each year.

How to best protect against the flu?

Annual vaccination is the best way of preventing the flu and any associated illness. It is important to be vaccinated every year because flu viruses are constantly changing, so the vaccine changes most years to protect against the flu viruses that are most likely to be around in the winter months. It is also important to get the flu vaccine every year because protection from the vaccine gradually declines over time. The preferred time to receive the flu vaccine is in autumn to allow time for the vaccine to work before the flu season starts. If the vaccine is not given in autumn, it is still useful to get it even if the flu season has already started.

There are other things you can do in addition to getting the vaccine to reduce your chance of coming into contact with viruses like the flu, and also passing them on to other people. These include washing your hands, covering your mouth and nose with your elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze, and staying away from work or social gatherings if you are unwell.

Who is eligible for free flu vaccine?

The flu vaccine is available free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) for people who have the greatest risk of becoming severely ill from the flu. These people include:

- pregnant women – the flu vaccine can be safely given during any stage of pregnancy
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of certain ages (children from 6 months of age up to their 5th birthday and those aged 15 years and over)
- people aged 65 and over
- people with certain medical conditions
 - cardiac disease
 - chronic respiratory conditions (including asthma that requires frequent hospitalisation)
 - chronic neurological conditions
 - conditions that reduce the function of your immune system
 - diabetes and other metabolic disorders
 - renal disease
 - haematological disorders (blood disorders)
 - children aged from 6 months to 10 years of age on long-term aspirin therapy.

¹ www.immunise.health.gov.au

If you are not sure if you or your family member is eligible for free vaccination under the NIP, speak to your doctor or other healthcare professional or visit the [Immunise Australia website](#). **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Who else should get the flu vaccine?

ATAGI recommends the flu vaccine for everyone from 6 months of age as anyone can get seriously ill from the flu. The vaccine also protects against less serious cases of flu which can often mean days off work or school.

In addition to the people who are eligible for free flu vaccine on the NIP (refer to above), ATAGI strongly recommends flu vaccine every year for people with Down syndrome or chronic liver disease and those who are obese (with a body mass index ≥ 40 kg/m²) as they are also at increased risk of becoming seriously ill from the flu.

ATAGI also strongly recommends that people be vaccinated if they are more likely to come in contact with or spread the flu such as healthcare workers, those who are around young children, or people working in aged care facilities. The flu vaccine might also be required for some travellers, which is best discussed with your healthcare provider when planning travel.

How is the flu vaccine given and how many doses are required?

Your doctor or vaccination provider will inject the flu vaccine directly into your muscle, usually in the upper arm (depending on age). Children from 6 months to 9 years of age who have never received the flu vaccine before should have two doses at least 4 weeks apart. Most people over the age of 9 years will require only one dose unless advised otherwise by their doctor.

What flu vaccines are available in 2016?

This year there are two types of flu vaccine available in Australia: trivalent influenza vaccines (TIVs) and quadrivalent influenza vaccines (QIVs). The difference between these vaccines is that TIV will provide protection against three flu viruses (two type As and one type B) while QIV will provide protection against four flu viruses (the three in the TIV plus an additional type B). There also may be differences in their cost. Certain QIVs are being provided free of charge under the NIP.

ATAGI recommends that QIVs are used in preference to TIVs as they have the potential to provide greater protection. However, if a QIV is not available then a TIV should be used as it is expected to still protect against the majority of the flu viruses predicted to be around this winter. Your healthcare provider can advise which vaccine type and brand is most suitable for you based on eligibility for free vaccine, vaccine availability and your or your family member's age (this is because only certain flu vaccines are allowed to be given to children).

Flu vaccine safety

Vaccines, like other medicines, can have side effects, but the vast majority of side effects from the flu vaccine are minor.

The only people who should not receive the flu vaccine are those who have had an anaphylactic allergic reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine or to any of the vaccine components. Although flu vaccines contain very tiny amounts of egg protein, people with a known egg allergy (including anaphylaxis) can be safely vaccinated by staff who are able to recognise and treat anaphylaxis, in the unlikely event that it does occur.

You cannot get flu from the flu vaccines used in Australia because the vaccines do not contain live flu virus.

Australia has rigorous systems in place to monitor adverse events following vaccination. You are encouraged to report any adverse event following the flu vaccine to either your general practitioner (or the person who vaccinated you), to the Adverse Medicines Events Line on 1300 134 237, or to the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) through the 'Report a problem' link on the [TGA website](#).²

² www.tga.gov.au

For more information on vaccine safety speak to your doctor or other healthcare professional or visit the [Immunise Australia website](#).**Error! Bookmark not defined.**