

## **Questions and Answers for the Public about Flu**

### **WHAT IS FLU?**

A respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms include headache, fever, cough, sore throat, aching muscles and joints. At times other symptoms can occur ranging from these minor symptoms through to pneumonia and rarely, death. In infants, symptoms may be less specific, for example diarrhoea and vomiting. Most people confuse influenza with a heavy cold. Influenza makes people feel worse than an ordinary cold. It usually has a more rapid onset and in most sufferers is severe enough to make them take to bed.

### **HOW DO YOU GET FLU?**

The flu virus is easily and quickly passed on by breathing in the tiny droplets from the breath of infected people. Symptoms usually appear between two and three days after breathing in the virus. An infected person can probably pass on the disease the day before their symptoms appear and remain potentially infectious for 3-5 days. In Northern Ireland influenza usually occurs from late autumn through to spring.

### **WHAT IS THE RISK FROM FLU?**

For most people influenza infection is just a nasty experience, but for some it can lead to complications that are more serious. The most common complications are bronchitis, pneumonia and middle ear infection, the last being especially common in children. If severe, these illnesses may require treatment in hospital. Occasionally influenza can be life threatening especially in the elderly (especially those who have other severe illnesses) and individuals who have a chronic complaint (including kidney disease, diabetes, significant asthma and bronchitis) or lowered immunity (due to steroid medication, cancer treatment) or other serious medical complaints.

### **WHAT IS THE RISK TO CHILDREN?**

In the last 3 years, there has been little flu in Northern Ireland. Mainly older people have been vaccinated against the illness. Therefore children, especially those who are not in at-risk groups, are less likely to have been exposed and then develop immunity to the virus. Because of this they have a greater risk of being infected when flu arrives. It is not uncommon to see the flu hitting children early in the flu season. Children who are at higher risk are those who have a chronic complaint (including kidney disease, diabetes, significant asthma and bronchitis) or lowered immunity (due to steroid medication, cancer treatment) or other serious medical complaints.

## HOW CAN I PREVENT MYSELF FROM GETTING FLU?

### ‘CATCH THE VACCINE, NOT THE FLU’

The flu vaccine offers the best protection. Flu vaccines are very safe. Because for the great majority of people (including children) flu is not life threatening, however unpleasant it may be, it is the ‘at risk’ groups who benefit most from vaccination.

### WHO SHOULD HAVE FLU VACCINE?

The current immunisation programme is therefore targeted at those most in need and for whom it will be most effective. Flu immunisation is currently offered to:

People aged 65 years and over

People aged less than 65 with the following ‘at risk’ medical conditions:

- chronic respiratory disease including asthma
- chronic heart disease
- chronic renal failure
- diabetes mellitus
- immunosuppression due to disease or treatment including asplenia or splenic dysfunction.

For children this means those who are in the at-risk groups (should be immunised. This protection lasts about a year. In addition, it is recommended that immunisation be offered to all health care workers.

Some drugs (anti-virals) are designed to be used during periods of increased flu activity to protect for a little while against severe complications. The vaccine protects for a longer period. Depending on if you’re in a risk group, your doctor may decide that these drugs are appropriate to use for you.

It is difficult to avoid infection if there is an epidemic. There is no reason to suggest that children be kept from school or nursery unless they have symptoms. Keeping someone with symptoms away from crowded places can reduce the risk of spreading it to others. You should therefore not let your child attend the school or nursery until at least 5 days after the symptoms start.

### WHAT CAN I DO IF I GET THE FLU?

If you get symptoms like ‘flu, **stay at home**, keep warm and rest, drink plenty of fluid, eat what you can and take paracetamol or aspirin to lower a high temperature (aspirin should **NOT** be given to children under the age of 16, unless on the advice of a doctor). Local pharmacists can offer expert advice over the counter.

If symptoms persist beyond four to five days or sufferers are worried about their condition alternatively contact your GP.

A leaflet with information about flu and flu vaccine is available at chemists and GP surgeries.