

Influenza - Information for residents and visitors

What is influenza?

Influenza (flu) is a viral respiratory illness that can affect many people during the winter months. Symptoms include a cough (chesty or dry), runny nose, congestion, sore throat, shortness of breath, aching muscles, exhaustion, cold sweats and a fever/high temperature.

Care home residents are at increased risk of complications including secondary chest infections and pneumonia and may require admission to hospital for supportive care. In these cases, flu can be life-threatening.

What is the treatment?

For most people, plenty of rest, keeping warm, drinking plenty of fluids (to prevent dehydration) and taking over-the-counter paracetamol or ibuprofen (to lower temperature and relieve aches) will help ease the symptoms. For more vulnerable people (pregnant women, children, the elderly, those with poor health), the GP may prescribe antiviral medication.

How is it spread?

When infected people cough or sneeze, the virus is sprayed into the air and droplets land on nearby surfaces, objects and equipment. People become infected in the following ways:

- Having close contact with an infected person - getting coughed or sneezed on, or shaking hands.
- Touching contaminated surfaces/objects (e.g door handles, tables, magazines).
- Eating food or drinks that someone who is ill has coughed or sneezed on.

Someone with flu can be contagious before they feel ill and can still spread the virus for up to a week after their symptoms have stopped.

What is an outbreak?

An outbreak happens when 2 or more people have flu at the same time in the same place; this can happen in hospitals, care homes and in the community.

Care home residents are extremely vulnerable because they are often elderly and frail, have underlying health conditions and are living in a closed environment where the virus can spread easily.

How do care homes control influenza?

- Staff will wear protective clothing (disposable aprons and gloves) and facemasks.
- Visitors will not be expected to wear disposable aprons and gloves unless they are helping a resident with personal care but may be offered facemasks.
- Cleaning and disinfection of affected areas will be increased.
- A restriction on visiting may be put in place if lots of residents are affected; you will be kept up-to-date of any changes to visiting policy and can ask a member of staff if you are concerned.
- Non-essential visits from hairdressers, podiatrists etc may be postponed.
- Residents may be offered preventative antiviral medication even if they have already had their seasonal flu vaccination and even if they have not yet developed the flu.

What can visitors do to help?

- ✓ Make sure you get your seasonal **flu vaccination** (if you are eligible).
- ✓ **Wash your hands** frequently with soap and water; alcohol hand rubs can be used between washes.
- ✓ Make sure you practice **good respiratory/cough hygiene**; cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing and try and catch it with a tissue; bin the tissue immediately and wash your hands straight away.
- ✓ Wear disposable aprons, gloves and a facemask if advised by a member of staff.
- ✗ Do not leave food open and exposed in residents rooms.
- ✗ If you are pregnant, have small children, or have a long term health condition we advise that you do not visit during a flu outbreak for your own safety; please discuss with a member of staff.
- ✗ If you think you might have the flu, **please do not visit the care home** as you could spread it; you can start visiting again when you have been symptom-free for at least 48 hours.

What can residents do help?

- ✓ **Wash your hands** frequently with soap and water; alcohol hand rubs can be used between washes.
- ✓ Make sure you practice **good respiratory/cough hygiene**; cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing and try and catch it with a tissue; bin the tissue immediately and wash your hands straight away.
- ✓ If you are feeling unwell, tell a member of staff immediately.
- ✓ If you catch the flu, staff will ask you to stay in your room and keep the door closed until you are better.
- ✗ Do not use common areas of the home during a flu outbreak.