

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

**Be vaccinated against the 'flu**—having the 'flu vaccination each year helps protect you, your children, & elderly relatives.

**Encourage others to be vaccinated**—particularly elderly relatives & friends. 'Flu vaccination is free for people aged 65 & over & for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples 50 years & over.

**Avoid spreading illness**—wash your hands regularly. Washing your hands well with liquid soap & water or alcohol hand rub before & after visiting will help reduce the spread of disease.

Cover your mouth when coughing & dispose of used tissues immediately & appropriately.

**Notice health changes**—alert staff if you feel that your elderly relative or friend is more lethargic or less responsive than usual. These may be early signs of illness.

**Stay away if sick**—if you have recently been ill, been in contact with someone who is ill or you have symptoms of respiratory illness (fever, sore throat, cough, muscle & joint pain, tiredness/exhaustion) or gastro, please do not visit the home.

**Limit your visit**—if there is an outbreak in the home, visit only the person you have come to see & keep children away if they or the elderly resident are unwell.

**Talk to staff**—the Director of Nursing or Care Manager will be happy to talk with you about how the residence manages an outbreak & how you can assist.

**Follow any restrictions the home has put in place.**

## TO GET FURTHER INFORMATION ON DISEASES SUCH AS 'FLU & GASTRO:

Speak with the Director of Nursing or Care Manager at the aged care home.

Speak with your GP or Nurse Practitioner

Visit the website [www.fightflu.gov.au](http://www.fightflu.gov.au) developed by the National Institute of Clinical Studies



## 'FLU & GASTRO Managing infectious diseases in aged care homes

Information for family, carers & friends



An Australian Government Initiative



Our icon is a stylised representation of a cross section of the influenza virus



Our icon is a stylised representation of the Norovirus



[www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au)

All information in this publication is correct as of February 2011

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## INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Outbreaks of infectious diseases such as influenza ('flu) & gastroenteritis (gastro) occur often in the general community. Where people live together, such as boarding schools, cruise ships & aged care homes, such outbreaks can be quite common & difficult to control. Older people can be particularly vulnerable to illness & complications from these diseases. 'Flu & gastro can be life threatening for people living in aged care homes.

### What is an 'outbreak'?

As few as two or three residents becoming ill in an aged care home can be considered the start of an outbreak of 'flu or gastro. This is because these diseases are contagious & can spread quickly. For some infectious diseases, even one case is viewed as an outbreak. Homes must act immediately to control the spread of infectious disease & protect other residents, staff & visitors from becoming ill.

### Reporting requirements

In most states & territories, aged care homes are asked to report an outbreak of 'flu, gastroenteritis & other specific infectious diseases to their local public health unit. The unit will then monitor the outbreak & advise the home in managing the outbreak if required.

## GASTROENTERITIS

Gastroenteritis is a highly infectious disease that causes nausea, diarrhoea & vomiting. Outbreaks of gastro are common in aged care homes & can be difficult to control. Gastro is spread through faeces & vomit & can spread very quickly from person to person, often through unwashed hands. Contaminated surfaces, bedding, clothing & food can also spread the disease. There are many causes of gastro including certain viruses that spread from person to person & bacteria from contaminated food or water.

Illness from gastro usually lasts 1 to 2 days but may last longer in elderly people. The elderly are also at higher risk of becoming dehydrated—loss of fluids—when ill with gastro. Dehydration can be very dangerous, particularly for elderly people with other health problems or weakened systems.

### Symptoms of gastroenteritis

Symptoms can occur quite rapidly. Not all people will experience all symptoms.

- \\ Nausea or vomiting
- \\ Diarrhoea
- \\ Loss of appetite
- \\ Bloating
- \\ Abdominal cramps & pain
- \\ Headaches & fever
- \\ Weakness, aches & lethargy

## SEASONAL INFLUENZA

Influenza is a highly infectious & potentially dangerous disease. 'Flu is spread by droplets from coughing or sneezing. 'Flu is often called 'seasonal' as it tends to occur in the colder, winter months.

Elderly people living in aged care homes are particularly vulnerable to 'flu. It can lead to complications such as pneumonia which in turn can result in death in the elderly & others whose health may put them at risk.

### Symptoms of seasonal 'flu

- \\ Fever/chills
- \\ Coughing or sneezing
- \\ Muscle & joint pain
- \\ Headache
- \\ Stuffy/runny nose
- \\ Sore Throat
- \\ Tiredness/exhaustion

### Elderly people may also experience:

- \\ Loss of appetite
- \\ Shortness of breath
- \\ Onset or increase of confusion
- \\ Increased chronic pulmonary disease symptoms

## IF AN OUTBREAK OCCURS IN THE AGED CARE HOME

Homes must have in place ways of preventing & reducing the spread of infection at all times—hand washing is always important. However, if there is an outbreak of 'flu or gastroenteritis, a number of extra precautions will be taken to prevent the spread of disease:

**Increased hygiene measures**—this will include increased hand washing as well as cleaning of bedding & rooms of ill people, kitchens & communal areas. During an outbreak the staff may also wear face masks, gloves & gowns when with ill residents.

**Collecting specimens**—staff will take swabs or stool samples to send for laboratory testing to allow for early identification of influenza & gastro.

**Isolating affected residents**—those who are displaying symptoms may be cared for in rooms away from other residents. This helps staff provide necessary care & reduces the spread of the infection.

**Dedicated care staff**—some staff may be required to provide care only to affected residents. This helps reduce the spread & protect other residents, families & staff.

**Notifying relatives & friends**—the home will inform visitors of an outbreak & may restrict access to particular areas. Homes may place signs indicating restrictions & requesting visitors to wash their hands before & after visiting to prevent spread.

**Ensuring ill staff do not come to work**—staff with symptoms of 'flu or gastro should not come to work. Even mildly unwell staff can spread illness & prolong an outbreak.