

InFLUenza it's **not** a cold, it's a **killer**

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Over 1500 Australians die each year from influenza, yet influenza continues to be seen as a relatively harmless disease that is more inconvenient than dangerous. While healthy people generally recover fully from a bout of influenza with rest and medication, there are many others at risk of developing life threatening complications such as pneumonia, who need to be protected from this disease.

Librarians work in a variety of situations, many of them populated with students, health care workers and people looking for information about their particular health condition. The following information may therefore be of interest to librarians working in health or education, based in the community, or who may be a carer or person in the 'at risk' group themselves.

Influenza vaccination is free and widely encouraged for people over 65. However, anyone with a chronic illness or whose immunity has been suppressed through medication has a 40 times increased risk of death from influenza, regardless of their age. This risk multiplies rapidly with multiple chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, which has an 800 times higher risk of death. So why is influenza not taken seriously?

Currently, only 42 per cent of these people under 65 and considered 'at risk' of developing life-threatening complications are taking advantage of flu vaccinations, despite strong evidence that annual vaccination is the best protection against flu. Lack of awareness of the real nature and threat that influenza poses seems to be the main reason for such low vaccination rates.

The National Institute of Clinical Studies (NICS), which is Australia's national agency for closing the gaps between evidence and best practice in health care, developed the 'Fight Flu' campaign in 2006 to try to address this gap.

What has become evident is that vaccinating only this group is not enough. Influenza is highly contagious so unless carers and health care workers are also vaccinated, the protection of 'at risk' people is severely hampered. The risk of contracting influenza is also far higher for health care workers, but currently only 20–50 per cent are vaccinated.

Latest news from NICS is that the Fight Flu campaign will be run again in 2007 with the important addition of a focus on increasing vaccinations in health care workers and carers.

The NICS website, www.fightflu.com.au, has been updated to help anyone looking for accurate, evidence-based information about influenza and the most effective means of reducing its spread in our community. It includes the latest research and is an excellent source of information for librarians to share with consumers, health professionals, students and carers.

Education is one of the best ways to fight flu, so please visit the site and consider vaccination if you are at risk or care for someone who is. This way, the only thing we'll spread this coming flu season is information.

To find out more, go to
www.fightflu.com.au

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