

## STOP FLU GET VACCINATED BEFORE THE FLU SEASON STARTS

The influenza virus is responsible for the acute viral infection commonly referred to as 'flu'. The South African influenza season falls in the winter months. Circulating strains of the flu virus vary every year. It is not possible to predict which type/s or subtype/s will predominate in the 2018 influenza season.

The **Influenza A(H1N1)pdm09** strain which first appeared in 2009, was responsible for the global flu pandemic. It was commonly referred to as 'swine flu.' In subsequent years this strain has become part of the annual influenza season with symptoms and risk of complications similar to the other seasonal influenza strains, and requiring the same management.

The signs and symptoms of flu include sudden onset of fever, dry cough, sore throat, headache, fatigue, cold shivers and hot sweats and generalised muscle pain. In most cases of flu, including **influenza A(H1N1)pdm09**, the course of illness is uncomplicated and symptoms usually resolve spontaneously within 3 to 7 days although cough and malaise could persist beyond this period. The following measures are advised for these patients: bed rest, increased intake of clear fluids to prevent dehydration and treatment of symptoms.

Ideally, everyone should be vaccinated against flu. However, there are individuals who are at risk for developing severe or complicated flu, notably pneumonia. These include:

- Pregnant women – irrespective of stage of pregnancy
- Healthcare workers
- Persons (adults or children) who are at high risk for influenza and its complications because of underlying medical conditions and who are receiving regular medical care for conditions such as chronic pulmonary and cardiac diseases, chronic renal diseases, diabetes mellitus and similar metabolic disorders; individuals who are immunosuppressed (including HIV-infected persons); individuals who are morbidly obese (body mass index  $\geq 40$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>)
- Residents of old-age homes, chronic care and rehabilitation institutions
- Children aged between 6 months and 5 years
- Children on long-term aspirin therapy
- All persons >65 years of age

Deaths occur each year as a result of complications of influenza. Complications of influenza in otherwise healthy persons do occur but these are rare events.

The 2018 influenza vaccine is currently available from public sector clinics and private pharmacies. Public sector clinics offer the vaccine to high risk groups free of charge, while stocks are available. Since it takes about two weeks after vaccination for protective antibodies to develop, it is recommended that people be vaccinated as soon as possible to ensure that they are protected before the flu season starts. Healthcare workers are encouraged to discuss influenza vaccination with their patients, in particular those who are at increased risk for severe influenza-associated complications.

If you cannot be vaccinated against flu, you can take some practical measures or precautions to prevent it, such as, covering your mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when coughing or sneezing, washing your hands regularly and protecting your health by drinking plenty of fluids, getting enough sleep, eating healthy and avoid being in close contact with those who are already infected.