About this document

This communications toolkit is intended to provide individuals and organisations with access to materials that can be used to promote health messages about influenza (flu) across a range of communications channels, including websites, intranets, social media platforms and newsletters.

About Healthdirect Australia

Healthdirect Australia is a national, government owned, not-for-profit organisation empowering Australians to manage their own health.

We were established in 2006 by the Council of Australian Governments with a mandate to work across jurisdictional boundaries to deliver telehealth and digital health services to the whole population.

All our services are funded by Australian governments. We work to ensure that people have 24/7 access to trusted information and the advice they need to manage their own health and health-related issues. Our rigorous clinical governance framework ensures that the services we offer are safe, reliable and consistent with national standards.

Healthdirect Australia’s services cater for people at all different stages of life, ranging from practical and emotional support during pregnancy through to advice about aged care. No matter where people live, or what time of the day or night it is, they can use our services to talk to a health professional, find trusted information and advice online and locate their closest health service.

We use the technology channels that Australians want and expect to use, and that provide the best value for money.

De-identified data captured through the healthdirect service is used to improve existing services and to contribute to national disease surveillance.

One example is influenza. We collect and analyse data about flu symptoms from the healthdirect helpline and provide these to the Australian Government during flu season to contribute to the Australian Influenza Surveillance Report.
Flu risks and trends in Australia

Influenza is an acute viral illness that mainly affects the respiratory system. Flu epidemics can cause substantial mortality, take an economic toll through lost workforce productivity and can put substantial strain on health services.

The age groups at greatest risk of developing severe complications are children aged less than 5 years and adults aged 65 years and over. These groups experience the highest mortality and hospitalisation rates. Other groups at high risk are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those with specific medical conditions.

In 2017, there were 745 deaths from flu Australia-wide; more than in any previous year. More than 9 in 10 people who died from the flu were aged 65 and older.

While it can happen any time, it’s more common to catch the flu, or experience flu-like symptoms, in the colder months of the year (April to October).

Flu risk typically stays low during the summer months and rises to a moderate or high risk at the peak of flu season. The risk can intensify in years of unusual flu activity, such as the pandemic in 2009 when a new, more virulent strain of influenza emerged. 2017 was a record year for flu with a longer season than usual.

In the below graph, if the blue line moves above the grey shaded area, Australia is experiencing a peak in people with flu-like symptoms. The grey area represents the typical flu range across the last five years (2013 to 2017).
Impact of the flu season on the health system

In Australia, it has been estimated that the flu is associated with an average of 366 respiratory and 1,400 all-cause deaths\(^5\), 18,000 hospitalisations and over 300,000 general practice consultations\(^6\) each year.

The increased number of people visiting GPs and emergency departments can put a strain on healthcare professionals, service times and overall efficiency of the health system. This includes telehealth services like the healthdirect helpline which triages callers to help them determine the appropriate level of care required, according to their symptoms.

Winter is also a peak time for people to catch a cold. While uncomfortable, people with a cold are unlikely to benefit from a visit to the emergency department, however, many people are not aware of the difference between a severe cold and the flu.

Increased awareness of how to avoid catching the flu and the difference between a cold and flu could significantly reduce the strain on the health system during the flu season.

It is important that health services take a coordinated approach to messaging in the lead up to flu season to educate and help people navigate the health system, be better informed and know when it is appropriate to self-manage their health.
Flu data

The importance of flu data

Ongoing surveillance of the severity, timing and predominant strains of influenza in the community each season helps guide public health prevention and control activities.

Collecting and sharing flu data can help the government and health system to:

- Coordinate public health prevention and control activities
- Detect and react to influenza epidemics early
- Identify risk groups and disease severity
- Estimate the impact of the epidemic
- Inform vaccine virus selection and assess the effectiveness of influenza vaccines and antiviral medications
- Inform additional surveillance requirements during a pandemic or severe flu season

Healthdirect flu data

Since 2012, around 750,000 calls per annum have been received and managed by healthdirect helpline nurses.

The symptoms identified by callers and nurses on the helpline are logged and each year certain symptoms categorised as flu or flu-like are extracted to give an indication of the community level of flu.

This data is provided to the National Influenza Surveillance Committee. A sub-committee of the Communicable Diseases Network Australia, the National Influenza Surveillance Committee plays an important role in understanding flu data to develop and maintain effective, responsive and scalable national influenza surveillance systems.

Dr Michael Araco is the medical advisor at Healthdirect Australia and our representative on the National Influenza Surveillance Committee, sharing healthdirect data and receiving updates on flu risks and trends in Australia.

Data from healthdirect is used in conjunction with other flu measures such as lab tests confirming flu, flu diagnoses, employee absenteeism, GP visits and ED presentations to get a full view of the scope and impact of each year’s flu season.

Since 2012, 750,000 calls per annum have been received and managed by healthdirect helpline
Key messages for consumers

These messages are designed to be used in marketing materials for consumers to help them prevent getting the flu and to appropriately navigate the health system if they are experiencing flu-like symptoms.

10 tips to fight the flu

- **Get the flu shot**
  It is important to get the influenza vaccination each year to continue to be protected, since it wears off after 3 to 4 months. Flu strains (types) also change over time.

- **Wash your hands**
  In addition to vaccination, good hygiene is one of the best ways to help prevent colds and flu from spreading. Wash your hands regularly with soap and water.

- **Cover coughs and sneezes**
  Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing. Preferably with your elbow rather than your hand.

- **Keep surfaces clean**
  Clean surfaces such as your keyboard, telephone and door handles regularly to get rid of germs.

- **Self-care at home**
  In most cases you can treat mild cold or flu symptoms at home.

- **Antibiotics won’t help**
  Antibiotics do not reduce symptoms of colds and flu as these illnesses are caused by viruses. Antibiotics only work for bacterial infections. Check if your cold and flu medication will help relieve symptoms on healthdirect’s medicine directory.

- **Bin your tissues**
  Throw disposable tissues in the bin immediately after using them.

- **Know the different symptoms for a cold and flu**
  A cold is not life-threatening and although uncomfortable does not require visit to the emergency department. A flu can escalate and may require medical attention.

- **Avoid sharing**
  Don’t share cups, plates, cutlery and towels with other people, if you can.

- **Check your symptoms first**
  Use the healthdirect Symptom Checker via the app or website, or call 1800 022 222, to determine if your symptoms require a visit to the emergency department, a visit to your GP or can be managed at home.
Key messages for health professionals

These messages are designed to be used in marketing materials for health professionals, to help them assist patients during flu season.

We encourage consumers to access the healthdirect Symptom Checker to help reduce strain across the health system, particularly over the winter period.

| healthdirect Symptom Checker | healthdirect Symptom Checker asks a series of questions and provides evidence-based, personalised advice; consumers are provided with self-care options or directed to see their GP or call 000 as appropriate. Symptom Checker is available via the healthdirect website and app. |
| healthdirect helpline | healthdirect helpline registered nurses are available to provide information and advice. It’s a free call on 1800 022 222. |
| healthdirect Service Finder | healthdirect Service Finder a national directory of health services including location, opening times, area of speciality and bulk-billing information. It is directly linked to the Symptom Checker and available via the healthdirect website and app. |
| healthdirect Question Builder | healthdirect Question Builder assists patients and doctors to make the most of their consultation time by preparing patients with questions they may want to ask. |
| healthdirect App | healthdirect App brings together the Symptom Checker, Service Finder and information from the healthdirect website. Search ‘healthdirect’ in your app store. |
| Cold or flu? | Cold or flu? this infographic can assist consumers to understand their symptoms and appropriate prevention and treatment. |
| Which medicine? | Which medicine? Consumers can learn if over-the-counter or prescribed medicines might help relieve cold and flu symptoms and if prescribed antiviral medication may be helpful. |
| Flu Risk Indicator | You can keep track of the flu season this year with our Flu Risk Indicator. It provides information about current risk levels and trends across Australia based on flu related calls to the healthdirect helpline. |
Resources

When to get the flu shot


Practical advice on when and why you should receive the flu shot with quotes from Dr Michael Gannon, president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA)

![Image of flu shot](image)

**Important note:** Images used in this document are only for healthdirect’s use and cannot be shared by partner organisations. If you are interested in using the images, please contact healthdirect on [advertising@healthdirect.org.au](mailto:advertising@healthdirect.org.au)

Flu risk indicator


The healthdirect Flu risk indicator is a visual representation of the current flu risk in Australia. Based on call data collected by Healthdirect Australia to the healthdirect helpline (1800 022 222), the tracker represents the percentage of callers who report symptoms of influenza-like illness (ILI), such as colds and flu, cough, sore throat, sinusitis or fever.

![Flu risk indicator map](image)
Resources

Infographic - is it cold or a flu?

https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/cold-or-flu-infographic

How can you tell if you have a cold or the flu? Share this infographic to let people know how they can compare their symptoms, debunk the most common myths and learn more about the flu vaccine. Still not sure if it’s cold or flu? Try healthdirect’s Symptom Checker to help you decide what to do next. If you have a cold, read up on the best way you can look after yourself.

Contact healthdirect marketing (advertising@healthdirect.org.au) for co-branding opportunities on healthdirect collateral.
Healthdirect Symptom Checker

Not sure what to do if you have a cold or a flu? The healthdirect Symptom Checker will ask you a series of questions to determine what your next steps should be.

The healthdirect Symptom Checker is an online guided self-triage tool which allows people to check their symptoms, and find trusted health information and advice on what to do next. Users are guided through a set of questions about their health concern and are given advice about the care they need at the time.

The purpose of the healthdirect Symptom Checker is to guide people to the appropriate care at the appropriate time, providing:

• Self-care information so people can safely look after themselves at home, or until they can visit their regular GP

• Information on what to keep watch for, when to call Triple Zero (000), or go to the emergency department

• General information to help people understand the symptoms they are experiencing.

If the consumer is directed to a health service, the healthdirect Symptom Checker will draw on the National Health Services Directory (NHSD) to provide a list of relevant health services with information, such as contact details, opening hours and availability of bulk billing.

When accessing the healthdirect Symptom Checker through the mobile app, it also provides a map, which users can easily navigate to the health service with GPS.
Find a service – GP, pharmacies, after hours services – after hours GP helpline, bulk billing GPs


Powered by the National Health Service Directory, the healthdirect Service Finder is a directory of health services searchable by location, opening times, bulk-billing capability, accessibility and parking. Once you’ve found the health service you need, Service Finder provides details including contact phone numbers and opening times plus a handy map and directions.
Resources

Healthdirect app

To provide even more ways to access healthdirect services, make sure you’ve downloaded the healthdirect mobile app. Health concerns can arise anywhere, and people can now call the healthdirect helpline, access health information content, use the healthdirect Symptom Checker, and find local services from anywhere they take their mobile phone. Available from the Apple App Store or google play.
Flu season content

Healthdirect articles:
Flu season:
https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/cold-or-flu-infographic

Flu-like symptoms:

Can “flare up”:
https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/asthma

Kids focus:

Getting rid of germs:

Hazards at home:

Less sun – less vitamin D:

Resources

Escaping winter – travel health:

Colder temperatures:

Drinking enough:

Checking in on each other:

Less opportunities (or motivation) to exercise:

Spending more time indoors... sitting still:

Treat yourself:

Know what to do:

Pregnancy, Birth and Baby articles:
Social media posts

**Cold or flu? (infographic)**
Do you know how to tell if you have a cold or the flu? Use @healthdirectaustralia infographic to compare your symptoms.

https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/cold-or-flu-infographic

**Flu Trends**
Do you know if you are at elevated risk of flu in your state or territory this week? Check the latest flu trends here.


**Flu blog post**
Can you catch the flu from being cold? @healthdirectaustralia bust 5 myths about the flu.


**Symptom checker**
Feeling unwell? Check your symptoms first. @healthdirectaustralia Symptom Checker allows you to find the appropriate care option.


**Coughs**
Coughs can last for several weeks but can often improve without medical treatment. Read @healthdirectaustralia self-care tips here.


**Important note:** Images used in this document are only for healthdirect’s use and cannot be shared by partner organisations. If you are interested in using the images, please contact healthdirect on advertising@healthdirect.org.au
Social media posts

App
Your health in your hands this winter season. Check your symptoms, find your nearest health service and get trusted health advice. Install @healthdirectaustralia App here.
www.healthdirect.gov.au/health-app

Colds and flu prevention
Prevent the spread of the cold and flu by washing your hands regularly with soap and water. Learn more tips for prevention here

Sore throat
Drinking hot water with honey and lemon is one way to relieve symptoms of a sore throat. Read more self-care tips from @healthdirectaustralia here.

Colds and flu medication
Antibiotics won’t help the symptoms of a cold or flu. Learn which over-the-counter medicines might help relieve cold and flu symptoms.

Colds and flu treatments
In most cases you can treat mild cold or flu symptoms at home. Learn tips to help relieve your symptoms from @healthdirectaustralia here.

Important note: Images used in this document are only for healthdirect’s use and cannot be shared by partner organisations. If you are interested in using the images, please contact healthdirect on advertising@healthdirect.org.au
References


