



## ALERT TO RESIDENTIAL CARE FACILITIES

### Increase in Outbreaks of Gastroenteritis and Influenza

#### KEY POINTS

- There has been a significant increase over recent weeks in reports of outbreaks of both gastroenteritis and influenza in residential care facilities (RCF) in WA.
- Help prevent influenza outbreaks by ensuring all residents and staff are immunised with the 2016 influenza vaccine.
- Ensure all staff-members are familiar with state and national guidelines for managing gastroenteritis and influenza outbreaks in RCF.
- Prepare for outbreaks by ensuring that staff are aware of and are able to implement infection control measures to minimise the risk of transmission.
- Please report all suspected or confirmed outbreaks to your local Public Health Unit.

The winter period corresponds with an increased risk of outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis and respiratory illness, including influenza, in RCFs. This year is no exception, with multiple outbreaks reported in recent weeks. This letter provides advice on measures for prevention and control of such outbreaks in RCFs, and a reminder of the relevant guidelines that can be accessed online.

#### GASTROENTERITIS

The WA Department of Health has noted a recent increase in the number of gastroenteritis outbreaks reported by RCFs, **with 18 outbreaks reported in the previous month**. The majority of these outbreaks have been caused by **norovirus**, which is highly infectious and readily transmitted from person-to-person.

*A gastroenteritis outbreak in a RCF is defined as: two or more residents or staff with diarrhoea and/or vomiting within a 24 hour period (over and above the usual number of cases in the facility).*

#### Preventing and managing gastroenteritis outbreaks

Ensure that all staff-members are aware of infection control and other procedures that can be used to prevent and control gastroenteritis outbreaks. Please ensure that your facility has adequate supplies of personal protective equipment and a sanitiser that will inactivate norovirus (such as diluted bleach).

#### Guidelines and forms

The following resources will help you prepare for, prevent and manage gastroenteritis outbreaks:

- WA Health *Guidelines for the prevention and management of gastroenteritis outbreaks in residential care facilities (second edition, 2013)*, can be found at:  
<http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/~media/Files/Corporate/general%20documents/communicable%20diseases/PDF/residentialcarefacilitygastroenteritisguidelines.ashx>
- The Australian government's *Gastro-Info: Outbreak Coordinator's Handbook for aged care* can be found at:  
[https://agedcare.health.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1426/f/documents/09\\_2014/d03221104\\_gastro\\_info\\_kit\\_outbreak\\_coordinators\\_handbook\\_webta.pdf](https://agedcare.health.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1426/f/documents/09_2014/d03221104_gastro_info_kit_outbreak_coordinators_handbook_webta.pdf)
- Your local Public Health Unit (PHU) should be notified if there is a gastroenteritis outbreak at your facility. Forms used for reporting outbreaks to the PHU can be found at:  
[http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/F\\_1/Infectious-disease-guidelines/Gastroenteritis-in-residential-care-facilities](http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/F_1/Infectious-disease-guidelines/Gastroenteritis-in-residential-care-facilities)
- Contact numbers for the Public Health Units can be found at  
[http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A\\_E/Contact-details-for-population-public-health-units](http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Contact-details-for-population-public-health-units)

# INFLUENZA

A range of respiratory viruses are currently circulating in the WA community and influenza virus activity is presently high. **Around 20 separate influenza outbreaks, nearly all due to the influenza A/H3N2 strain, have been reported in RCFs in the past few weeks.** Hence, RCFs need to be able to promptly identify, investigate and manage suspected cases and outbreaks of influenza.

An **influenza outbreak** in a RCF is defined as:

- *three or more linked cases of influenza-like illness in residents or staff within a 72 hour period*  
**PLUS**
- *at least one case with a positive laboratory test for influenza virus* **OR**
- *at least two cases having a positive point-of-care test.*

**Influenza-like illness (ILI)** is defined as:

- *sudden onset of fever  $\geq 38^{\circ}\text{C}$*  **PLUS**
- *cough and/or other respiratory symptoms (e.g. shortness of breath, runny nose)* **PLUS**
- *one or more systemic symptoms (e.g. fatigue, muscle pain, headache)*

## Preventing and managing influenza outbreaks

### Immunisation

- **All RCF residents and staff (target > 90% coverage) should be vaccinated against influenza.** Annual vaccination is necessary to protect against the circulating seasonal strains of influenza.
- Unimmunised RCF staff, including both healthcare workers and support staff, place themselves and others at risk. Once infected, they can transmit influenza to elderly or other vulnerable residents, and to their family. Absenteeism of ill staff also presents risks for the RCF.
- RCFs should keep a record of influenza vaccination status of all staff and residents to enable a risk assessment should an influenza outbreak occur.

### Guidelines

- *A practical guide to assist in the prevention and management of influenza outbreaks in residential care facilities in Australia.* See: [www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cdna-flu-guidelines.htm](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cdna-flu-guidelines.htm)
- The "Influ-Info – Influenza Kit for Aged Care" is a set of resources to assist RCF to recognise and respond to an outbreak. See: <https://agedcare.health.gov.au/publications-articles/resources-learning-training/influ-info-influenza-kit-for-aged-care>
- Another useful reference is the *Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2010)*. See: [www.nhmrc.gov.au/node/30290](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/node/30290)
- If there is an outbreak, the local Public Health Unit should be notified, and can provide information and support. Contact details can be found at: [http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A\\_E/Contact-details-for-population-public-health-units](http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Contact-details-for-population-public-health-units).

I would appreciate you bringing this alert to the attention of your staff. If you have trouble accessing the guidelines, or need clarification or advice, please contact your local Public Health Unit.



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