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Dear family member

Winter is fast approaching and brings with it an increased risk of viral respiratory illnesses in the community. While all types of respiratory viruses can cause sickness in the elderly, influenza (commonly called 'the flu') is a particularly contagious infection that can cause severe illness and death for vulnerable people.

The 'flu' season

In Australia the 'flu' season generally occurs between April and October. Residential care facilities are particularly susceptible to influenza outbreaks during this time. Even when facilities actively try to prevent outbreaks occurring, many external factors (like the strain or type of the flu virus) may lead to residents or staff contracting the 'flu' and outbreaks in residential care facilities.

Families play an important role in protecting their relatives from community viruses. Practical steps you can take to prevent influenza from entering residential care facilities are outlined below.

Vaccination

Having the influenza vaccination will protect you, your children, people with chronic conditions or low immunity and elderly relatives. It is important to have your influenza vaccination every year as the vaccine changes to reflect the expected (or most common) strain or type of influenza. Encouraging others to get their influenza vaccination, particularly your elderly relatives in residential care facilities and everyone who visits them is the best way to prevent influenza infection.

The influenza vaccination is free for children between 6 months and 5 years of age, people aged 65 and over, pregnant women (in any stage of pregnancy), most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and individuals with certain medical conditions. Discuss vaccination with your local pharmacist or general practitioner.

Avoid spreading illnesses

Washing your hands well with liquid soap and water or alcohol hand rub before and after visiting and after coughing or sneezing will help reduce the spread of disease. Cover your mouth with a tissue or your elbow (not your bare hand) when coughing or sneezing and dispose of used tissues immediately and wash your hands.

Follow any restrictions the residential care facility has put in place

Facilities will post signs at entrances and within their units to inform you if an outbreak is occurring so look out for these warning signs when entering the facility.

It's also important to follow the infection control guidelines as directed by the facility staff. This may include wearing a disposable face mask and/or other protective equipment (gloves, gowns) as instructed. Certain group activities may be postponed during an outbreak.

Stay away if you're unwell

If you have recently been unwell, been in contact with someone who is unwell or you have symptoms of respiratory illness (fever, sore throat, cough, muscle and joint pain, tiredness/exhaustion) please do not visit the facility until your symptoms have resolved.

Limit your visit

If there is an outbreak in the residential care facility, we ask that you only visit the person you have come to see and keep children away if they or your resident family member is unwell. Avoid spending time in communal areas of the facility if possible to reduce the risk of spreading infection.

Thank you for your assistance in adhering to these steps. These measures will greatly assist residential care facilities and protect the health of your relatives in the event of an influenza outbreak this season.

Should you require further information regarding the influenza season and outbreaks in residential care facilities please refer to our website:

<<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases/infection-control-guidelines/respiratory-illness-management-in-aged-care-facilities>>

Yours sincerely,



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