

The Flu in Australia, 2019

In 2019, Australia's health system has had to face one of the worst flu seasons on record. The number of reported flu cases for 2019 has climbed over 300,000 at the time of writing, which is 80 per cent higher than 2018 and 17 per cent higher than 2017 – described by experts as the 'worst ever'.

Sadly, this year at least 812¹ people have died from the flu – an increase from 64 people in 2018 and up from at least 804 in 2017 – whilst almost 4,000 people have been hospitalised.²

Influenza Deaths by State and Territory, 2015-2019

State and Territory ⁽¹⁾	2017	2018	2019
New South Wales ³	529	43	312
Queensland			
South Australia ⁴	124	12	105
Western Australia			
Victoria ⁵	151	9	136
ACT			
Northern Territory			
Tasmania			
Total⁶	804	64	812

(1) State data available for New South Wales, South Australia, and Victoria but not available for Queensland, Western Australia, ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania.

New South Wales was one of the States hit hardest, with 37 per cent of Australia's reported flu cases and over 300 deaths coming from the State alone, compared to Queensland and Victoria (21 per cent each) and South Australia (8.5 per cent). Western Australia – despite avoiding much of the 2017 flu crisis – faced its worst flu season on record, with flu cases nearly four times higher this year when compared to 2018.

Influenza notifications by total number and per 100,000 population across states and territories (2015-2019)⁷

State/Territory	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
New South Wales	30,315	35,602	103,874	17,520	112,841
	398	460	1,320	219	1,416
Queensland	28,059	23,282	56,592	15,697	66,407
	587	480	1,148	313	1,328
South Australia	15,649	7873	28,490	5,897	25,754
	920	459	1,652	339	1,488
Western Australia	5993	7837	6009	5870	22,720
	235	306	233	226	876
Victoria	17,265	12,924	48,120	11,758	66,015
	286	286	761	182	1,022
ACT	1206	1604	3098	476	3952
	304	397	751	113	940
Northern Territory	676	701	1474	1195	1458
	276	285	595	483	591
Tasmania	1434	1055	3506	452	2937
	278	203	671	85	562
Total Notifications	100,597	90,878	251,163	58,865	302,084
Notifications per 100,000	422	375	1,021	235	1,211

How Pharmacists have helped

As Australia's most easily accessible health professional in the community, pharmacists play a growing role in minimising the spread of influenza. Last year, more than a million Australians chose to receive their flu shot from a community pharmacy, doubling this year to two million.⁸

2019 was just the third year every State and Territory in Australia allowed pharmacists to vaccinate against the flu. Most recently, Victoria lowered the age of flu vaccines to 10 to relieve pressure off GPs⁹ – putting the State in line

with Western Australia and Tasmania. Research shows that pharmacists are as trusted as GPs by the Australian public¹⁰ explaining their willingness to see them for straight-forward issues like the flu shot.

In Australia, increasing vaccine access has ultimately meant that more families have been protected from the virus, whilst relieving GP clinics to focus on more complex conditions and procedures. Freeing up GP appointments which would otherwise have been spent administering flu shots means GPs can spend more time with their patients and treat more serious or complicated issues.

National Immunisation Program (NIP)

If you belong to any of the 'at risk' categories (below)¹¹, you are eligible to receive a free flu shot each year from a GP, but not in a community pharmacy in most States. Victoria offers the program in community pharmacies for patients who are over 16. The ACT is currently trialling the NIP in pharmacies for those aged 65 years and older¹².

Medical risk factors	This includes anyone aged 6 months and over who has: heart disease severe asthma (requiring frequent medical consultations or use of multiple medications) chronic lung conditions diseases of the nervous system which affect your breathing impaired immunity diabetes kidney disease haemoglobinopathies children aged six months to 10 years on long-term aspirin therapy
All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 6 months and over	
65 years and over	
Pregnant women	Any trimester during each pregnancy

References

- ¹ Using laboratory confirmed data from the Australian Government Influenza Surveillance Report, No. 12, 2019 23 September to 6 October 2019, available at: [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-surveil-ozflu-flucurr.htm/\\$File/flu-12-2019.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-surveil-ozflu-flucurr.htm/$File/flu-12-2019.pdf)
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Using laboratory confirmed data from NSW Influenza Surveillance Reports 2017-2019, <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/reports.aspx>
- ⁴ Using laboratory confirmed data from SA Health Communicable Disease Control Branch 2017-2019, <https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/about+us/health+statistics/surveillance+of+notifiable+conditions>
- ⁵ Using laboratory confirmed data from VIC Health seasonal influenza reports 2017-2019, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/researchandreports/seasonal-influenza-reports-2019>
- ⁶ Australian Government Influenza Surveillance, [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-surveil-ozflu-flucurr.htm/\\$File/flu-12-2019.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-surveil-ozflu-flucurr.htm/$File/flu-12-2019.pdf)
- ⁷ Using laboratory confirmed data from the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System, http://www9.health.gov.au/cda/source/rpt_4.cfm
- ⁸ Health Minister Greg Hunt, Speech, September 2019. Available: <https://www.guild.org.au/news-events/news/forefront/v09n18/annual-parliamentary-dinner-puts-spotlight-on-community-pharmacy>
- ⁹ The Age, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/pharmacists-to-give-flu-jab-to-kids-aged-ten-and-upwards-20191010-p52zdw.html>
- ¹⁰ Roy Morgan Research, Image of Professions Survey 2016: Nurses still easily most highly regarded – followed by Doctors, Pharmacists & Engineers, 11 May 2016, available at: <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/6797-image-of-professions-2016-201605110031>
- ¹¹ Department of Health. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/immunisation/immunisation-throughout-life/national-immunisation-program-schedule#flu-influenza-vaccines>
- ¹² Australian Journal of Pharmacy. Available at: <https://ajp.com.au/news/act-pharmacists-get-the-nip/>