

Childhood Influenza Vaccination Program (6 months to < 5 years)

Frequently Asked Questions

Influenza (flu) is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus. It is spread from person to person by virus-containing respiratory droplets produced during coughing or sneezing. Influenza can cause serious complications such as pneumonia and even death in otherwise healthy people, although the risk is higher for people with underlying medical conditions. The influenza vaccine reduces the chances of getting influenza and its potentially serious complications.

The National Immunisation Program (NIP) provides free influenza vaccine for young children aged 6 months to under 5 years.

Why should I get my child vaccinated against the flu?

- Influenza can be fatal, even in healthy children. Influenza vaccination significantly reduces a child's risk of dying from influenza.
- Influenza vaccination can reduce the risk of influenza-associated hospitalisation. Infants and children under 5 years of age are at increased risk of serious influenza-related complications. Complications of influenza include croup, bronchitis, otitis media (middle ear infection), pneumonia, heart and other organ damage, and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).
- A child may have a milder case of influenza if they have been vaccinated.
- Getting your child vaccinated protects others around them. Young children with influenza are more likely than other age groups to spread the infection to others. Vaccination of this age group can provide protection to vulnerable people in the community including babies less than 6 months who are too young to receive the vaccine, people with low immunity and the elderly.

Who is eligible for the free vaccine?

All children aged 6 months to under 5 years.

What if my child is 5 years or over?

If your child is 5 years of age or older and has a medical condition or other risk factor that increases their risk of influenza-related health complications, they may be eligible to receive the free influenza vaccine.

If your child is not eligible for the free influenza vaccine, talk to your General Practitioner (GP) about purchasing the vaccine.

What if my child is 5 years or older and of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent?

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 6 months and older are eligible for free influenza vaccine. You can access the free vaccine through your GP or Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service.

Where can I access the free vaccine for my child?

You can access the free influenza vaccine through your usual provider, including your ACT Health Early Childhood Immunisation Clinic or GP. Although the vaccine is free, you may need to pay a consultation fee to see your GP. Ask when you book your appointment.

To make an appointment at an Early Childhood Immunisation Clinic, phone Central Health Intake on (02) 5124 9977 between 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 3:30pm Wednesdays (excluding public holidays).

How many doses are required?

To develop strong protection, it is recommended children under 9 years of age have two doses, at least four weeks apart in the first year they receive the influenza vaccine.

If they have received the flu vaccine previously, only one dose is required each subsequent year.

When should my child get the influenza vaccine?

The influenza vaccine will be available from April/ May.

In the ACT, most influenza infections occur in winter and spring. It is recommended to have the vaccine in autumn as this allows time to develop protection before the start of the influenza season and to ensure protection lasts through the influenza season.

Children who need two doses should be vaccinated as soon as possible after the vaccine becomes available to ensure enough time is available to receive a second dose prior to the influenza season commencing.

If your child doesn't get the vaccine in autumn, they can still receive the influenza vaccine. It is never too late to vaccinate against influenza. While cases of flu peak in late winter, infections occur all year around.

Does my child need an influenza vaccine every year?

Yes. Influenza viruses constantly change. Each year, an influenza vaccine is developed to match the strains that are predicted to be around during the upcoming influenza season. Protection against influenza requires yearly vaccination with a vaccine containing the most commonly circulating strains.

Is the influenza vaccine safe in young children?

Yes. The influenza vaccine is safe and recommended for all people aged over 6 months. All vaccines must pass strict safety testing before being approved for use in Australia. Further information on vaccine safety is available on the Sharing Knowledge About Immunisation (SKAI) website: <http://talkingaboutimmunisation.org.au>

In addition, a national program called AusVaxSafety monitors real time adverse reactions to influenza vaccines using patient feedback. This monitoring system receives data regarding children who have been vaccinated since 2015. Adverse reactions collated by AusVaxSafety can be seen at <http://www.ncirs.org.au/our-work/ausvaxsafety>.

What are the side effects?

As with all medicines, there is a possibility of side effects following the influenza vaccine. Possible side effects include swelling, redness and pain at the injection site, fever, tiredness, and muscle aches. These side effects usually commence within a few hours of vaccination, can last for 1 to 2 days and resolve without requiring specific treatment.

Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), a rare disorder causing muscle weakness, was associated with a specific flu vaccine given in the US in 1976. Since then, evidence for the association between GBS and seasonal flu vaccination has been variable and inconsistent across flu seasons. If there is an increased risk of GBS following flu vaccination it is small, in the order of one to two additional GBS cases per million doses of flu vaccine administered. A person is more likely to get GBS from infection with the influenza virus than from the influenza vaccine.

Talk to your immunisation provider about what to expect or if you are concerned about your child's health following vaccination.

Can the vaccine give my child influenza?

No. The influenza vaccines currently available in Australia do not contain live virus. This means that the vaccine cannot give people who receive it influenza.

Following the influenza vaccination, an immune response is triggered. This produces protection against influenza that can cause symptoms that mimic influenza such as fever, body aches and headaches. Some people may confuse these symptoms with the influenza infection.

How effective is the vaccine?

No vaccine is 100% effective. While the effectiveness of the influenza vaccine can vary each year, generally influenza vaccination reduces the risk of influenza illness by between 50% and 60%. The effectiveness of the vaccine depends on a number of factors including how well the strains in the vaccine match the strains circulating during the influenza season. In some years the match is better than others. Although the influenza vaccine is not 100% effective, it is still the best way to reduce the risk of getting influenza. Protection can take up to two weeks to develop.

Can the vaccine be given with other childhood vaccines?

The influenza vaccine can be given with all other childhood vaccinations. If your child is also receiving their 12 month scheduled NIP vaccinations, they will be offered the Prevenar 13 vaccine. This vaccine protects against pneumococcal disease. There is the possibility of a small increased risk of fever if both the influenza vaccine and Prevenar 13 vaccine are given at the same time. Because of this small risk, you may choose a gap of at least 3 days between these two vaccines.

Who should not have the influenza vaccine?

Children who have had anaphylaxis (a severe allergic reaction) to a previous dose of the influenza vaccine or to any component of the vaccine should not have the influenza vaccine.

If I had the influenza vaccine while I was pregnant, does my baby need the vaccine?

Yes. Whilst vaccination during pregnancy provides protection to the mother and her newborn in the first few months of life, protection wears off as babies get to 6 months of age. It is therefore recommended that infants have the influenza vaccine from 6 months of age regardless of whether their mother received the vaccine during pregnancy.

If I am breastfeeding and have had the influenza vaccine, does my baby need the vaccine?

Yes. Breastfeeding has many benefits; however, it doesn't provide enough protection to infants against influenza. Therefore, infants are recommended to have the influenza vaccine from 6 months of age regardless of whether they are breastfed.

If my child has an egg allergy, can they have the influenza vaccine?

Yes. Children who have an egg allergy (including a severe allergy) can safely receive the influenza vaccine. In Australia, influenza vaccines are grown in eggs, however due to new manufacturing methods, the amount of material from the egg in the influenza vaccine is small. The risk of anaphylaxis from the influenza vaccine in patients who are allergic to eggs is very low.

Even though the risk of anaphylaxis or an adverse event is very low, children with a severe allergy should be vaccinated by healthcare providers experienced in recognising and treating anaphylaxis. Talk to your doctor about your child having the influenza vaccine if they have a severe egg allergy.

What should I do if my child has a reaction after vaccination?

If your child develops a fever after the influenza vaccination, give your child paracetamol as directed by the manufacturer's instructions, ensure they drink extra fluids, and wear light-weight loose clothing. Contact your doctor if a high fever persists or if you are concerned.

If your child has an unexpected reaction that you are concerned about, please contact your local doctor or seek medical attention. All serious or unexpected reactions should be reported to the Health Protection Service, Immunisation Unit on (02) 5124 9800.

Where can I go for more information?

Please visit <https://www.health.act.gov.au/services/immunisation> or contact Health Protection Service, Immunisation Unit, on (02) 5124 9800.

Other resources:

- National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS)
<http://www.ncirs.org.au/health-professionals/ncirs-fact-sheets-faqs>
- Australian Government Department of Health [Immunisation Program](#)
- Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation [The Australian Immunisation Handbook](#)

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