

## ACT Childhood Influenza Vaccination Program (6 months to under 5 years)

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### ***Q&As for General Practitioners, Practice Nurses and Immunisation Providers***

The ACT Government is funding free influenza vaccine for young children 6 months of age to under 5 years from April 2018.

The National Immunisation Program (NIP) continues to provide free influenza vaccines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in this age group and children with medical conditions predisposing to flu-related health complications.

### **Why are young children recommended to receive the vaccine?**

- Young children under 5 years are at increased risk of hospitalisation and increased morbidity and mortality from influenza.
- Flu vaccination in young children under 5 years has been shown to reduce the risk of flu-associated hospitalisation and death in this group.
- Young children contribute significantly to influenza transmission in the community. Vaccination of this age group can provide protection to vulnerable people who cannot receive the vaccine.

### **Is this a new recommendation?**

No. The Australian Technical Advisory Group for Immunisation (ATAGI) has recommended children 6 months of age to under 5 years be immunised annually against influenza since 2013. However the influenza vaccine has not been funded under the NIP for all children in this age group.

### **Who is eligible to receive the free flu vaccine?**

All children in the ACT aged 6 months of age to under 5 years of age who are not currently eligible for the influenza vaccine under the NIP.

## How many doses do young children require?

Children aged 6 months to 8 years\* require two doses in the first year they receive the vaccine. This is to maximise the immune response to the vaccine strains. Doses should be at least four weeks apart. Children who have received one or more doses of trivalent or quadrivalent influenza vaccine in previous years will only need one dose in current and future seasons.

People with certain immunocompromising conditions (i.e. solid organ transplant or haematopoietic stem cell transplant) require two doses when receiving the vaccine for the first time post-transplant.

## Why is the influenza vaccine recommended annually?

The strains in the influenza vaccine are reviewed yearly to ensure they match the strains that are predicted to affect Australians. This means the virus strains included in the vaccine can change yearly. Also, recent evidence suggests that protection against influenza begins to wane three to four months following vaccination. Consequently, annual influenza vaccination is recommended prior to the start of the flu season (i.e. in autumn). In the ACT, most influenza infections occur in winter and spring.

## Which vaccines will be used?

Two quadrivalent vaccines will be used, which protect against four different flu viruses; two influenza A viruses and two influenza B viruses.

- Children 6 months to < 3 years: FluQuadri Junior® (0.25ml pre-filled syringe)
- Children  $\geq$  3 years to < 5 years: FluQuadri® (0.5ml pre-filled syringe)

Half a dose of FluQuadri should NOT be used for children less than 3 years as FluQuadri is not registered for use in this age group.

## Where can patients access the vaccine?

Patients can access the vaccine through their GP or ACT Health Early Childhood Immunisation Clinic.

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\* Children aged 5 years and above are not eligible for the free influenza vaccine through this program.

## **If my patient has received the influenza vaccine during pregnancy or is breastfeeding, should their infant be vaccinated?**

Yes. The protection provided by maternal influenza vaccination during pregnancy wanes by 6 months. The protection provided through breastfeeding is limited. Therefore from 6 months of age, infants are recommended to receive the influenza vaccine regardless of maternal immunisation status.

## **Can the influenza vaccine be administered with other childhood vaccines?**

Yes. The influenza vaccine can be administered with any other vaccine. There is a possibility of a small increased risk of fever following concomitant administration of the influenza vaccine and 13-valent pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (13vPCV). Parents/carers of infants or children who are recommended to receive both of these vaccines should be advised of this possible risk and given the option of an interval of at least three days between vaccines.

## **What are the side effects?**

Fever, malaise, and myalgia occur commonly (1-10%). They can commence within hours following vaccination and can take one to two days to resolve. Induration, swelling, redness and pain at the injection site occur commonly (10%). Immediate adverse events such as anaphylaxis occur rarely.

Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), a rare disorder causing muscle weakness and sometimes paralysis, was associated with a specific flu vaccine given in the US in 1976. Since then, the data on the association between GBS and seasonal flu vaccination have 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.

In Australia in 2010, an excess of fever and febrile convulsions following influenza vaccination was reported in children less than 5 years, particularly children under 3 years. These reports were associated with one manufacturer's vaccine (Seqirus [previously bioCSL] Fluvax and Fluvax Junior). This vaccine is no longer registered by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for children under 5 years and is not recommended for children under 9 years.

If your patient experiences a serious or unexpected adverse event following immunisation please complete the Immunisation Adverse Event Reporting Form available from <https://tinyurl.com/ACTHealthAEFI> or call the ACT Health Immunisation Unit on (02) 6205 2300.

## **What contraindications are there to giving the influenza vaccine?**

The only absolute contraindications to influenza vaccines are:

- Anaphylaxis following a previous dose of any influenza vaccine;
- Anaphylaxis following any vaccine component.

## **If my patient is allergic to eggs, can they still receive the influenza vaccine?**

Yes, egg allergy is not a contraindication to influenza vaccination. Patients with an egg allergy including anaphylaxis can be safely vaccinated with the influenza vaccine. Published evidence indicates the risk of anaphylaxis in patients who are allergic to eggs is very low.

Children with a history of anaphylaxis to egg should be vaccinated by healthcare providers experienced in recognising and treating anaphylaxis.

Refer to the Australian Immunisation Handbook and the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCI) guidelines for additional information on influenza vaccination of individuals with an allergy to eggs.

## **How do I access the vaccine?**

All general practices and ACT Health Early Childhood Immunisation Clinics will receive a base stock of the vaccine once it becomes available in April 2018. Additional orders of stock can be made by submitting a vaccine order form to the Vaccine Management Unit, Health Protection Service. For further information, contact (02) 6205 2300.

## **What if my patient is 5 years or over?**

Anyone 5 years or older is not eligible for free influenza vaccine through this program. They may however be eligible for free influenza vaccine under the NIP. Patients who are not eligible under the NIP can talk to their GP or pharmacist (if aged over 18 years) about purchasing the vaccine.

## Do I need to keep records of vaccines administered?

Yes, as with all other vaccinations, it is important to ensure that data is being entered onto the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR). This is best practice and assists in providing a true record of vaccination status for all individuals and in determining immunisation coverage in the ACT. Downloading the latest version of your practice management software will ensure you have access to the latest AIR functionality and vaccine codes.

## Further information

For further information about the influenza vaccination program for young children, visit <http://www.health.act.gov.au/our-services/immunisation/whats-new> or contact the Immunisation Unit, Health Protection Service on (02) 6205 2300.

## Additional Resources

- ACT Health [Influenza Fact Sheet](#)
- Australian Technical Advisory Group, [Australian Immunisation Handbook 10<sup>th</sup> Edition](#)
- National Centre for Immunisation Research & Surveillance, [Influenza Fact Sheet for Immunisation Providers](#)
- Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy, [ASCIA Guidelines – Vaccination of the egg-allergic individual](#)

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