

## ACT Childhood Influenza Vaccination Program (6 months to under 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. Flu 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 flu vaccine reduces the chances of getting flu and its potentially serious complications.

The ACT Government is funding free flu vaccine for young children from 6 months of age to under 5 years from April 2018. This program expands on the National Immunisation Program (NIP) that already provides free flu vaccine for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and all children with a medical condition that increases their risk of influenza complications.

### **Why should I get my child vaccinated against the flu?**

- Flu can be fatal, even in healthy children. Flu vaccination significantly reduces a child's risk of dying from influenza.
- Flu vaccination can reduce the risk of flu-associated hospitalisation. Infants and children under 5 years of age are at increased risk of serious flu-related complications. Complications of flu include croup, bronchitis, otitis media (middle ear infection), pneumonia, heart and other organ damage, and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).
- Flu vaccination may make your child's illness milder if they do get sick with the flu.
- Getting your child vaccinated protects others around them. Young children with flu 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 and people with low immunity.

### **Who is eligible for the free vaccine?**

The ACT government is funding flu vaccine for all children in the ACT aged 6 months to under 5 years of age who are not currently eligible for flu vaccine under the NIP.

To find out who is currently eligible for flu vaccine under the NIP, check the [Immunise Australia website](#) or talk to your doctor or Early Childhood Immunisation nurse.

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

If your child is 5 years of age or older and not eligible for the free flu vaccine under the NIP, talk to your General Practitioner (GP) about purchasing the vaccine.

## **Where can I access the free vaccine for my child?**

You can access the free flu 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 Community Health Intake on (02) 6207 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, children eligible under this program are recommended to have two doses of the vaccine in the first year they receive the flu vaccine. There should be a gap of at least four weeks between doses. Only one dose is required each year if they have received the flu vaccine previously.

## **When should my child get the flu vaccine?**

The flu vaccine will be available from April 2018. It is recommended to have the vaccine in autumn. This allows time to develop protection before the start of the flu season and to ensure protection lasts through the flu season. In the ACT, most flu infections occur in winter and spring.

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

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

## Which vaccine will my child get?

Each year there are different types of flu vaccines available. Some flu vaccines are only for use in certain age groups. The following flu vaccines are being used in the 2018 ACT program:

- Children aged 6 months to less than three years: **FluQuadri Junior®**
- Children aged 3 years to under 5 years: **FluQuadri®**

## Does my child need a flu vaccine every year?

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

## Is it safe in young children?

Yes. The flu vaccine is safe and recommended for all people aged over 6 months. All vaccines available in Australia must pass strict safety testing before being approved for use by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). The TGA monitors the safety of vaccines after they have been approved.

In addition, a national program called AusVaxSafety monitors real time adverse reactions to flu vaccines using patient feedback. This monitoring system received data from over 7000 children in 2015 and 2016 and there were no specific safety concerns identified.

In 2010 in Australia, one brand of flu vaccine was linked to higher than expected numbers of fever and febrile convulsion in children under 5 years. The use of the vaccine was suspended and is no longer registered by the TGA for use in children under 5 years.

## What are the side effects?

As with all medicines, there is a possibility of side effects following the flu 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 one to two 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 the flu?**

No. The flu vaccines currently available in Australia are made from killed virus and do not contain live virus. This means that the vaccine cannot give people who receive it the flu.

Following the flu vaccination, an immune response is triggered. This produces protection against the flu but can cause symptoms that mimic the flu. Some people may confuse these symptoms with the flu infection.

## **How effective is the vaccine?**

No vaccine is 100% effective. While the effectiveness of the flu vaccine can vary each year, generally flu vaccination reduces the risk of flu illness by between 40% and 60% when most circulating flu viruses are well-matched to the flu vaccine. 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 flu season. In some years the match is better than others. Although the flu vaccine is not 100% effective, it is still the best way to reduce the risk of getting the flu. Protection can take up to two weeks to develop.

## **Can the vaccine be given with other childhood vaccines?**

The flu vaccine can be given with all other childhood vaccinations. If your child is also receiving their 6 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 flu vaccine and Prevenar 13 vaccine are given at the same time. Because of this small risk, you may choose a gap of at least three days between these two vaccines.

## **Who should not have the flu vaccine?**

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

## **If I had the flu vaccine while I was pregnant, does my baby need the vaccine?**

Yes. All pregnant women are recommended to get the flu vaccine during their pregnancy as it 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. Infants are therefore recommended to have the flu vaccine from 6 months of age regardless of whether their mother received the vaccine during pregnancy.

## **If I am breastfeeding and have had the flu vaccine, does my baby need the vaccine?**

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

## **If my child has an egg allergy, can they have the flu vaccine?**

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

## **What should I do if a reaction occurs after vaccination?**

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

If they have 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) 6205 2300.

## **Where can I go for more information?**

Please visit <http://www.health.act.gov.au/our-services/immunisation/whats-new> or contact Health Protection Service, Immunisation Unit, on (02) 6205 2300.

## Other resources:

- ACT Health [Influenza Fact Sheet](#)
- National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) [Influenza Fact Sheet](#)
- Australian Government Department of Health [Immunise Australia Program](#)
- Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation [The Australian Immunisation Handbook 10<sup>th</sup> Edition](#)

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