

## **Free flu shots for children aged six months to under five years**

From April 2018 all NSW children aged from six months to under five years of age will be offered free influenza shots. Parents can access the free flu shot from their usual immunisation provider: their GP, Aboriginal Medical Service, community health centre or local council.

The flu jab will reduce your child's risk of influenza (flu), minimise the spread of flu and protect vulnerable groups including babies too young to receive the vaccine, those medically at risk and those with weakened immune systems.

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## **FAQs - Influenza Vaccine for Children six months to under five years of age**

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### **Where and when will the free vaccine be available?**

GPs, Aboriginal Medical Services, community health centres and local councils that immunise children will be provided with the free vaccine from April 2018.

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

The NSW Government has announced a \$3.5M program in 2018 to provide influenza vaccine to all children in NSW aged from six months to under five years of age who are not currently eligible for influenza vaccine under the National Immunisation Program (NIP).

### **Why are children in this age group being offered the flu vaccine?**

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) advises that infants and children younger than five years of age, and especially those under three years of age, are more likely to get severe flu infections that require hospitalisation than older children, and sometimes these can be fatal. In the 2017 flu season in NSW two children under five years of age died from flu and over 640 flu-related deaths were reported in other age groups.

Young children with flu are also more likely to spread the infection to others. By protecting them we can also help protect other vulnerable people in the community, including babies too young to receive a flu vaccine (those aged less than six months) and the elderly.

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

All pregnant women are recommended to have the flu vaccine during their pregnancy. Some of the antibodies that your body makes in response to the vaccine pass to your baby during your pregnancy, and this helps protect your baby from flu in the crucial first few months of life.

Unfortunately this protection does not last beyond six months of age. This is why the flu vaccine is recommended and now funded for all children from six months of age.

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

No, the flu vaccine has been recommended by the Australian Technical Advisory Group for Immunisation (ATAGI) for **all** children from six months to under five years of age since 2013. However, under the National Immunisation Program, the free flu vaccine has only been provided for Aboriginal children in this age group and for other children with medical conditions placing them at greater risk of serious complications from the flu.

NSW Health has now funded a program to ensure all children in this age group have access to the annual flu vaccine for free.

### **Is it safe for young children to receive this vaccine?**

Yes. The flu vaccine is safe and recommended for all persons aged six months and older who want to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with flu. In addition to all vaccines being registered and monitored by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), NSW Health reviews all reports of potential adverse events following immunisation to ensure prompt follow up and action as needed.

In addition, a national program that monitors unexpected events following immunisation and ensures prompt public health actions, called AusVaxSafety, is used. Annual analysis of parent feedback via phone SMS surveys since 2014 has confirmed the safety of the flu vaccine each year in thousands of children.

In 2010 one brand of flu vaccine caused high fevers in some children. This adverse effect was quickly detected by the monitoring systems, and the vaccine removed from the market, but unfortunately some children had long term complications from this incident. Flu vaccines from this manufacturer are no longer given to children, and the vaccine safety monitoring system has since been enhanced so that any problems can be picked up more quickly.

The vaccines purchased by NSW Health for children: FluQuadri Junior® and FluQuadri®, have been used in Australia since 2015 with no evidence of any safety concerns.

### **Are there specific flu vaccines for children?**

Yes, each year there are different types of flu vaccines available. The influenza vaccines to be used for the 2018 NSW program depend upon the age of the child.

- Children aged six months to less than three years will receive the FluQuadri Junior® vaccine.
- Children aged from three years to less than five years will receive the FluQuadri® vaccine.

Your immunisation provider will be able to provide you with information on the flu vaccine currently available for your child according to their age.

### **How many vaccine doses are recommended for children?**

To develop strong protection, children in this program (children who are aged from six months to under five years) are recommended to have two vaccine doses **in the first year** they receive a flu vaccine, with at least four weeks between doses. Children who have been immunised against flu previously will only require one dose each year.

### **Why is it necessary to receive another dose of the flu vaccine each year?**

Each year the strains of the flu virus which are predicted to affect Australians are reviewed and the available vaccines may be changed according to the strains. The protection provided by flu vaccines begins to wane after a few months so it is better for children (and adults) to be re-vaccinated each year before winter.

### **Does the flu vaccine work?**

It takes 2 weeks for the flu vaccine to become effective after vaccination. The vaccine can prevent flu in approximately 50-60% of people. Because the vaccine is not 100% effective, it means a small proportion of people may still catch the virus after getting the vaccine.

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

If your child is six months of age and receiving their routine immunisations, they will receive the vaccine called Prevenar 13 that protects against pneumococcal disease (meningitis and pneumonia). As there is a slight risk of increased fever if the flu vaccine is administered on the same day as Prevenar 13, you may choose for your baby to have a three day interval between these vaccines. The flu vaccine can safely be given with other childhood vaccines that your child will be receiving.

### **Can flu vaccines cause the flu?**

There is no live virus in the flu shot, so you cannot get the flu from the vaccine. The myth that the vaccine causes the flu probably results from a misinterpretation of mild vaccine side effects, which are a sign that the body is responding to the vaccine and producing protection against the real thing.

### **Are there side effects from flu vaccine?**

Sometimes. Possible side effects include a mild fever, headache, and muscle and joint pains. These can occur in the first three days after the vaccination and can generally be managed safely at home. Talk with your immunisation provider about what to expect.

### **Will influenza vaccination be required for enrolment in child care in NSW?**

No, as influenza vaccine is seasonal and is not required by the Australian Immunisation Register for the purposes of being fully immunised, it is not a required vaccine for enrolling in childcare in NSW.

This will be noted in information for parents and childcare centres.

**What if I am breastfeeding, does that mean my baby doesn't need the vaccine from six months?**

Breastfeeding is great, but doesn't provide enough antibodies to your baby's system to protect them again flu.

**How do I know if my child has the flu?**

Influenza is common in winter and early spring, and symptoms include fever, chills, cough, sore throat, tiredness and muscle aches, and sometimes vomiting and diarrhoea. For more information, see: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/qanda.aspx>

**Further information**

NSW Health. Influenza fact sheet

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/qanda.aspx>

NSW Health. Pregnant women and influenza fact sheet

[http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/influenza\\_and\\_pregnancy.aspx](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/influenza_and_pregnancy.aspx)

NCIRS. Influenza Fact Sheet

[http://www.ncirs.edu.au/assets/provider\\_resources/fact-sheets/influenza-fact-sheet.pdf](http://www.ncirs.edu.au/assets/provider_resources/fact-sheets/influenza-fact-sheet.pdf)

NHMRC. The Australian Immunisation Handbook (10th edition)

<http://www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/Handbook10-home>