

Prioritise the young for flu vaccination, expert urges

Sydney – Saturday 30th April 2022 – National vaccination data reveals that only one-in-four (26%) children aged under five years received a free influenza vaccine in 2021, leaving the majority of this high-risk age group unvaccinated and vulnerable to infection.¹⁻³

The alarmingly low influenza vaccination rate among young children^{1,2} has prompted expert calls for greater awareness among parents on how to protect children from influenza.

Children younger than five years are particularly vulnerable to severe influenza infection³ and that's why all Australian children aged 6 months to 5 years have been eligible for influenza vaccination at no cost through the National Immunisation Program since 2020.⁴

Infectious diseases paediatrician Professor Robert Booy explained that the spread of influenza was suppressed in 2020 and 2021⁵ due to lockdowns, border closures and improved hygiene, but that "may change this year".

"It's logical that with fewer people infected in recent years, there is less herd protection going forward. So, it's possible we may see a rebound influenza season in 2022. Certainly, with borders reopening there will be an influx of visitors, and a likely rise in respiratory infections that travel with them," he said.

"When influenza circulates in the community, young children are among the hardest hit and most likely to pass on the virus.³ They really need to be prioritised for protection this winter."

Professor Booy said that by comparison to the elderly (65 years or older), who are also considered at high risk of serious illness from influenza and eligible for Government-funded vaccination,⁴ this older age group were vaccinated at a relatively high rate in 2021 (77 per cent).^{1,2}

"The oldest members in the community are being vaccinated against influenza at three times the rate of the youngest members of our society,"¹ said Professor Booy.

"Clearly, more needs to be done to help parents understand the risk that influenza poses to young children and that effective protections are readily available."

Professor Booy said that despite efforts by the Federal Government to remove barriers to vaccine access for young children, childhood influenza vaccination was too often forgotten.

“Families and healthcare professionals work hard to ensure we have close to 95 per cent coverage for the schedule of Australian childhood vaccinations,⁶ yet influenza uptake pales in comparison.”^{1,2}

“Annual influenza vaccination is recommended for all Australians aged over 6 months and is free to around 1.5 million children aged up to 5 years.^{4,7} The seasonal influenza vaccine may not be scheduled in the same way as other childhood vaccines, however we can’t overlook that it is strongly recommended for these children,” Professor Booy explained.

In 2019 alone, 36,569 children under 5 years were diagnosed with influenza and approximately 5,000 were hospitalised.^{8,9}

“With the flu season around the corner and COVID-19 still spreading, it is important to be prepared for both. I encourage parents to see a doctor to discuss the best way to protect themselves and their families against infection,” Professor Booy concluded.

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