

Despite long-standing recommendations, the uptake of influenza vaccination in Australian children with high-risk medical conditions is low – new study.

Australian children with high risk medical conditions are not being sufficiently vaccinated against influenza. A new study has revealed that more than half (59%) of children with high risk conditions, and 86% with standard risk conditions are not being vaccinated.¹ Children with high risk medical conditions, including severe respiratory disease, diabetes, cancer and other conditions which impair immunity, are prone to severe influenza infection.

Many high risk children in Australia remain unvaccinated against influenza despite long-standing recommendations for its use in this group.

The study, recently published by Elsevier, noted that there was an average of three clinic visits per child and opportunities to vaccinate were simply being missed. “We know that children with underlying medical conditions are at particular risk of severe complications from influenza,” said Dr Nigel Crawford, a paediatrician at Melbourne Children’s Hospital. “This study from Sydney has shown similar findings to those looking at influenza vaccine status in other paediatric hospitals in Australia and indeed throughout the world. We need high risk patients and their families to be aware of the risk of severe influenza and be vaccinated. Importantly for these children, the vaccine can be administered for free from their general practitioner, with any queries directed to their treating doctor. “

As temperatures plummet around the country, the ISG is monitoring the spread and impact of the disease in Australia & New Zealand and has noticed a sharp increase in the number of influenza cases in the past few weeks. The number of laboratory confirmed flu cases in Australia is now close to 10,000 which means there is a lot more cases out there as only a small number of people get tested.

The good news is that it’s not too late to get vaccinated against Influenza this year. “Vaccination is the best protection against influenza.” Dr Crawford added. “We need to ensure that those most vulnerable in the community are being protected. It’s very simple, but it saves lives.”

The flu vaccine is free for children and adults suffering underlying medical conditions including asthma and other respiratory disease, heart and kidney disease, type 1 and 2 Diabetes and cancer.

What: Winter Campaign Influenza Specialist Group
When: Wednesday, 16th July 2014
Where: Nation Wide
Interviews: Paediatrician and ISG Expert Dr. Nigel Crawford
Paediatrician and ISG Expert Prof Robert Booy

It is important for people to be immunised annually as the vaccine usually gets updated each year because influenza viruses change, and this is the case for the 2014 vaccine. In addition, during the course of a year, a person’s immunity reduces by 50 per cent or more, so regardless of the changes

¹ Prevalence and determinants of influenza vaccine coverage at tertiary pediatric hospitals:
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264410X14008457>

it's important to keep boosting your immunity. The predominant virus in the US this past flu season was H1N1, the same virus that was responsible for the global influenza pandemic in 2009.

Each year, influenza causes more than 18,000 hospitalisations and costs the Australian healthcare system \$85 million. More alarmingly, influenza is responsible for around 1,500 deaths, similar to Australia's annual road death toll.

Contact the ISG's media team for an interview with a medical expert in your state, or with ISG experts Dr Nigel Crawford or Prof Robert Booy:

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For more info about the flu, the vaccine and how to protect yourself visit:
www.flusmart.org.au

Flu Facts

In Australia flu causes:

- 1,500–3,500 deaths annually - more than the road toll - depending on the severity of the season
- 18,000 extra hospitalisations
- 300,000 extra GP visits
- Millions of dollars in healthcare and workplace productivity costs
- An estimated 15% of adults and 30% (or more) of young children will be infected annually.

Is the flu dangerous?

Yes. Influenza is a highly contagious, potentially fatal disease that is estimated to cause between 1,500 and 3,500 deaths annually. This is higher than the national road toll.

The flu can cause serious illness, particularly in people with underlying medical conditions, older adults, pregnant women and young children. Influenza can make other conditions, including respiratory or heart problems, even worse.

How long does the flu virus live outside the body?

The virus can spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes small virus-containing droplets into the air. If you are nearby, you can breathe them in and infect your respiratory tract. The influenza virus can survive for more than 8 hours on hard surfaces such as a traffic light button, a telephone, the photocopier or the handle of a supermarket trolley. Touching contaminated surfaces (including hands) and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes can also lead to infection.

How do you catch the flu?

Commonly known as 'the flu', influenza is a highly contagious disease.

The viruses are spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes small droplets containing the virus into the air. If you're nearby, you can breathe them in and infect your respiratory tract.

Is the flu vaccine safe for pregnant women?

Yes, international studies have shown that the vaccine is safe for pregnant women and actually protect mother and baby. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently announced pregnant women as the highest priority for flu vaccination. The flu shot for pregnant women has a 3 for 1 benefit: It protects the mother, the unborn baby, and the newborn infant by protective antibodies that are passed through the placenta and breast milk.

What's the difference between the 'flu and a cold?

Many people confuse the common cold with influenza. However, influenza is usually much more severe and can lead to hospitalization and death.

Is it free?

Flu vaccine is free for Australians who qualify under the National Immunisation Program (NIP), namely:

Pregnant women;

All individuals aged 65 years and over;

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over;

Individuals aged 6 months and over with medical conditions predisposing to severe influenza, namely;

- Cardiac disease, including cyanotic congenital heart disease, coronary artery disease and congestive heart failure
- Chronic respiratory conditions, including suppurative lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and severe asthma
- Other chronic illnesses requiring regular medical follow up or hospitalisation in the previous year, including diabetes mellitus, chronic metabolic diseases, chronic renal failure and haemoglobinopathies
- Chronic neurological conditions that impact on respiratory function, including multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injuries and seizure disorders
- Impaired immunity, including HIV, malignancy and chronic steroid use
- Children aged 6 months to 10 years on long term aspirin therapy

About the Influenza Specialist Group

The ISG is a not for profit organization that aims to reduce the impact of influenza in Australia through educational programs and public awareness activities. The ISG works in conjunction with key Australian professional and consumer groups and the Australian Federal, State and Territory Departments of Health in their educational activities regarding influenza and its prevention. The ISG comprises Australian and New Zealand medical and scientific specialists with an interest in influenza. The ISG is chaired by Dr Alan Hampson, former Deputy Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza. www.isg.org.au