

Immunisation

Health Column

Apr
2016

This week (24–30 April) is World Immunisation Week – the worldwide campaign to promote the use of vaccines to protect people of all ages against disease. It is estimated that immunisation prevents up to 3 million deaths worldwide each year. It also prevents many people being hospitalised and suffering ongoing health problems.

Immunisation is very safe and effective. It stops the spread of highly infectious and life-threatening infections such as chicken pox (known as varicella), hepatitis, influenza, measles, mumps, polio, rubella, tetanus, and whooping cough (known as pertussis). The benefits of immunisation far outweigh the risks of serious side effects.



Health authorities recognise immunisation as one of the world's most successful and cost-effective health interventions. Immunisation can offer protection from infections both on a global and community level. Even those who are too young to be immunised or those who cannot be immunised due to medical reasons can be protected by immunisation. They are protected when the people around them are immunised, because the infection can't spread. This is called herd immunity. Herd immunity works most efficiently if a sufficient number of people (about 90% for most infections) are immunised. So through immunisation, you are not just protecting yourself against disease but also the entire population.

Immunisation strengthens the body's immune system. The immune system fights infection in the body. A way of becoming immune to an infection is to receive a vaccine. Vaccines are dead or weakened versions of infection-causing germs (bacteria or viruses), parts of bacteria or weakened bacterial toxins. When you receive a vaccine, usually via an injection, your body produces antibodies that will help you fight an infection caused by that bacteria or virus.

In Australia, the National Immunisation Program (NIP) schedule lists the recommended vaccines for infants, children, teenagers, older people and those at risk, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, pregnant women and those with certain medical conditions. The recommended vaccines on the NIP are available free to eligible people. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist, or inquire at your local community centre about immunisation programs in your area.

It is very important that children receive all the recommended vaccines on the NIP. Sometimes children also need to be given a vaccine that is not on the NIP, such as a newly developed vaccine.

Immunity against many infections can last a long time, sometimes up to 30 years. However, some vaccines, such as influenza (known as the flu) are needed every year. This is because influenza viruses are constantly changing and a new vaccine is developed each year to give protection against the new variety of influenza. Get a yearly influenza vaccine to remain protected.

Common side effects of immunisation are swelling, redness and pain at the injection site, and mild fever. Most side effects only last a short time and the person recovers without any problems. Ask a doctor, pharmacist or immunisation clinic about side effects of immunisation. Paracetamol or ibuprofen can reduce fever and relieve discomfort after immunisation, if necessary.

If you want to know more about immunisation, talk with your local pharmacist. Pharmacists are medicine and health information experts. They can help you understand immunisation and provide you with current information.

For more information, you can get a Self Care Fact Card on *Childhood immunisation* from pharmacies that provide the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's (PSA) Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.