

# Flu vaccination: Perspectives of Australian parents



Poll 6A, May 2017

## Detailed report

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### Report highlights

- Less than a third (31%) of Australian parents are planning to have their child immunised against the flu this season
- Over a quarter (28%) of parents incorrectly believe that healthy kids don't get seriously unwell from the flu and one in six (18%) think that the flu is not a serious disease
- Almost nine in ten (88%) parents are unsure about the safety of the flu vaccine in children
- One in six (18%) parents are worried about the side effects of flu vaccine in children
- The majority (68%) of Australian parents have not discussed the flu vaccine for their child with a health care provider in the past year
- Parents seeking information about the flu vaccine for their child are most likely to speak to their GP

In a survey fielded in January and February 2017, Australian parents were asked to rate their level of agreement with a number of statements relating to the benefits and safety of the influenza vaccine. They were also asked about their uptake of the flu vaccine for themselves and their children.

Across a sample population of 1,945 parents, data were collected on a total of 3,492 children aged between one month and 18 years. The median number of children per parent was two, with a range from one to eight.

## Influenza vaccine uptake

Among the 3,492 children studied, parents collectively indicated that 19% had received the flu vaccine during the Autumn/Winter season of 2016. Reported uptake was similar across age groups, with 18% of children under six years of age, 20% of primary school-aged children and 21% of teenage children reportedly having received the vaccine.

Parents were also asked whether they planned to have their child vaccinated against the flu this year (for the Autumn/Winter of 2017). Less than a third (31%) of parents said that they planned to have their child vaccinated against the flu this season, with 38% saying they did not plan to have their child vaccinated against flu and a further 31% indicating they were not sure (see figure 1). There was no difference in intended flu vaccine uptake across parent income or state. Very small differences in favour of flu vaccine uptake were found for male respondents, younger respondents, and respondents with younger children.

Forty per cent of parents indicated that they had received the flu vaccine themselves in the past year. Those parents who were vaccinated against the flu were more likely to indicate an intention to vaccinate their child against the flu this year.

## Flu vaccine cost and impact on uptake

One in five (19%) Australian parents indicated that they cannot afford to pay for the flu vaccine for their children, with a further 30% saying they were not sure whether they could afford to pay for the flu vaccine. Just under half (48%) of all parents said they would have their child vaccinated against the flu if the flu vaccine was free, just over a third (35%) said they were unsure whether they would give their child the flu vaccine even if it was free and 17% said they would not.

The flu vaccine is recommended for everyone from six months of age, but is available free under the National Immunisation Program for people who are at higher risk from flu and its complications. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged six months to less than five years and 15 years and over; people aged six months and over with medical conditions such as severe asthma, lung or heart disease, low immunity or diabetes; people over 65 years of age and pregnant women, at any stage of pregnancy. Among all children studied, 43% of their parents indicated that they did not know whether their children were eligible for free flu vaccine or not.

### Percentage of parents planning to immunise their child against the flu this season

All respondents (n=1945, 100%)

■ Yes ■ No ■ Not sure

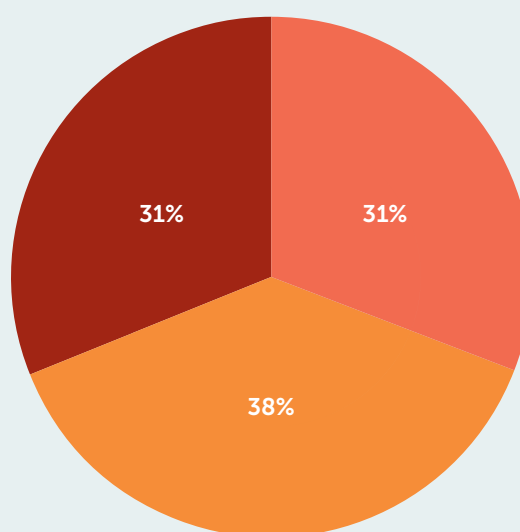


Figure 1.

## Flu vaccine-related perceptions and concerns

The results of this poll suggest the level of knowledge and understanding about influenza and the flu vaccine for children is low among Australian parents. One in six parents (18%) incorrectly believe that healthy kids are unlikely to catch the flu and over a quarter (28%) incorrectly believe that healthy kids don't get seriously unwell from the flu. One in six (18%) think that the flu is not a serious disease.

Children, including healthy children, are more likely to catch the flu than adults (20–30% of children compared to 10–30% of adults). Every year thousands of children get sick from the flu in Australia and more than 1,500 children are admitted to hospital for confirmed flu. Healthy children under five are the most likely group to be hospitalised for complications related to flu. Children can die from complications related to flu, such as neurological and respiratory complications. Research has shown that around half of the children who are admitted to Intensive Care Units (ICU) and die with flu-related complications were previously healthy, with no underlying medical issues. Those parents who indicated that they did not intend to vaccinate their children against the flu this winter (see figure 1) were more likely to incorrectly believe that the flu is not a serious disease and that healthy kids don't get seriously unwell from the flu.

This poll found a significant percentage of Australian parents are worried about the safety of the flu vaccine in children, with only 12% believing the flu vaccine is safe for children. Twenty-five per cent of parents believe the flu vaccine is not safe in children and a further 63% are unsure about the safety of the flu vaccine in children. Those parents who indicated that they did not intend to vaccinate their children against the flu this winter (see figure 1) were more likely to hold the incorrect belief that the flu vaccine is not safe in children.

One in six parents (18%) indicated that they are worried about the side effects of the flu vaccine in children. Eight per cent of parents incorrectly believe that children can get flu from the flu vaccine and a further 27% are unsure about this. All vaccines currently available in Australia, including the flu vaccine, must pass stringent safety testing before being approved for use by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). Flu vaccine safety is also closely monitored in Australia. Recent Australian data shows that fever occurs in approximately 6–7% of kids under 10 and redness and swelling at the injection site occurs in up to one in five children who receive current flu vaccines. Serious side

effects, such as seizures with a fever, are rare. There is no live virus in the flu vaccine so people cannot catch the flu from the flu vaccine.

Parents are also uncertain about the efficacy of the flu vaccine. Ten per cent of parents believe the flu vaccine does not work well to protect children from the flu and almost half are unsure about this (46%). Research suggests the flu vaccine is effective in around 70% of children, and while it may not prevent the flu all together it is effective in reducing serious flu-related complications.

Many parents are also unclear about the recommendations regarding who should have the flu vaccine and how often. Over a quarter (27%) of parents incorrectly believe a child will not need the flu vaccine again this year if they received the vaccine last year and a further third (34%) of parents are unsure about this. A new flu vaccine is required each year because the flu virus changes from year to year. Each season, a new flu vaccine is produced that is designed to protect against the flu viruses that research indicates will be most common during the upcoming season. Another reason for the yearly dose is because a person's immunity to the flu from the vaccine wears off with time. Half of all parents were unclear about the recommendation for flu vaccine in children under five years of age, with 20% incorrectly believing it is not recommended in this age group and a further 30% being unsure. The flu vaccine is recommended in children aged six months and older. Children aged six months to under nine years of age require two doses, at least four weeks apart in the first year they receive the vaccine. One dose of influenza vaccine is required in subsequent years. A single dose of flu vaccine is recommended for all children aged nine years and over.

## Health care provider access and advice regarding flu vaccine

The majority of Australian parents (68%) reported that they had not discussed the flu vaccine for their child with a health care provider in the past year. Just over a quarter (28%) reported that they had talked about the flu vaccine for their child with a health care provider and 4% were unsure. Among those parents who had spoken with a health care provider about the flu vaccine, the vast majority (86%) had discussed this issue with a general practitioner (GP). Those parents who indicated they had a regular GP caring for their family were more likely to discuss the flu vaccine for their child with their GP. Other health care providers accessed by parents for information about the flu vaccine in children included paediatricians (4%), nurses (4%) and pharmacists (3.5%).

Among those children who had a parent discuss the flu vaccine for their child with a GP (n=833), only 54% of

## Flu vaccine recommendation by GP, across child age, as reported by parents

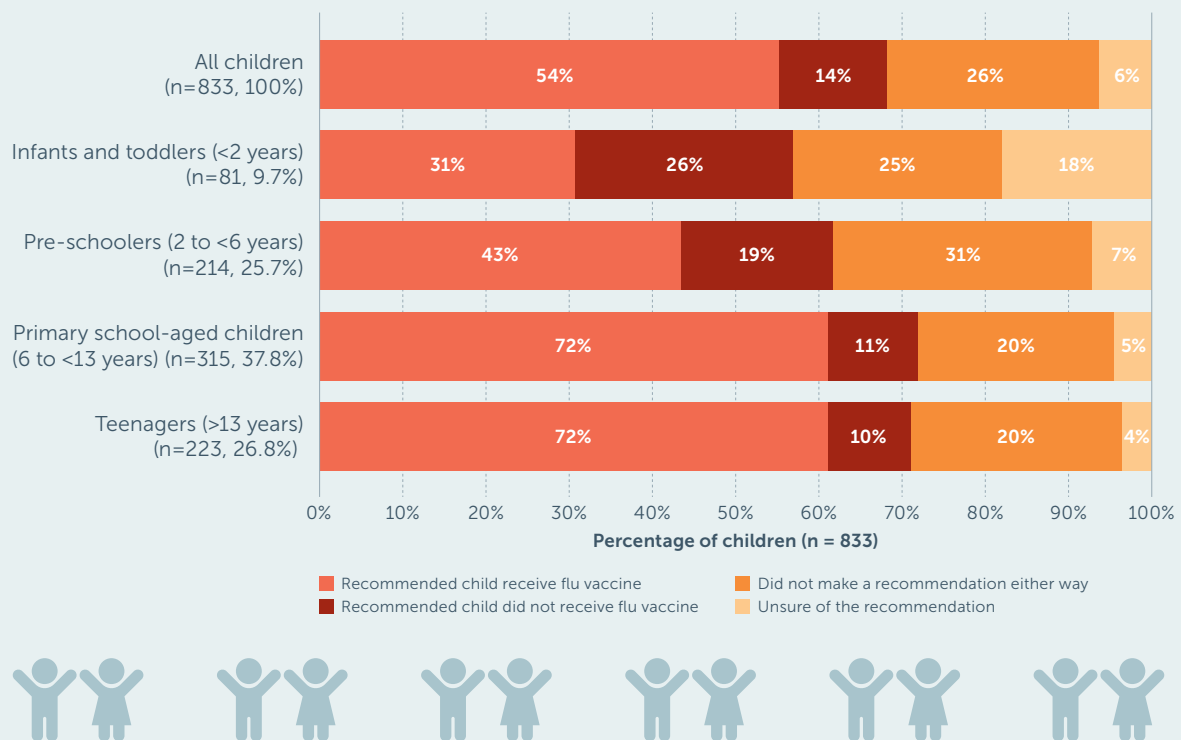


Figure 2.

parents reported that the GP had recommended their child receive the flu vaccine, with 26% reporting they had not been given a recommendation either way, 14% saying they were advised that their child not be given the flu vaccine and 6% reporting they were unsure as to what the recommendation was. Parents of younger children were less likely to be recommended their child receive the flu vaccine and more likely to be advised against their child receiving the flu vaccine by the GP (see figure 2).

### Implications

Influenza or 'the flu' is the leading cause of hospitalisation due to a vaccine-preventable disease in Australian children under five years of age. Every year in Australia thousands of children become unwell with the flu and over 1,500 are hospitalised with confirmed flu and related complications. Around half of those children who are admitted to hospital or the ICU and become seriously unwell and die from the flu are previously healthy children. The flu vaccine is readily available and safe for children, yet uptake levels are low among Australian families, with less than a third of parents indicating that they plan to have their children vaccinated against the flu this season.

This poll suggests that many parents hold misplaced beliefs and concerns about influenza and the flu vaccine, and this is influencing their decision about whether to vaccinate their children against the flu. Many parents are not aware that children frequently catch the flu, with young children being at increased risk, and that healthy children are also at risk of becoming seriously unwell with flu-related complications. These results suggest that the majority of parents hold misplaced concerns about flu vaccine in children, primarily relating to safety and side effects. Parents are unclear about which age groups of children are recommended to receive the flu vaccine and about who is eligible for free flu vaccine. Despite high levels of concern and uncertainty, only a minority of parents have discussed the flu vaccine for their child with a health care provider. Parents should be encouraged to speak with their health provider about flu vaccine for their children. Efforts should also be made to better educate families about the flu and flu vaccine in order to assist parents in making an informed decision about having their child vaccinated against the flu.

Cost was identified as a potential barrier to accessing flu vaccine for children in some families, with around one in five parents saying they could not afford the flu vaccine for their children. Half of all parents reported they would vaccinate their child against the flu if the vaccine was free. Universal funded flu vaccine for Australian children has been on the agenda for some time and this poll reinforces the potential for such a program to substantially increase flu vaccine uptake rates.

This poll also raises concern about the practice of primary health care providers in relation to flu vaccine recommendations in children, with parents reporting that GPs only recommended their child receive the flu vaccine in just over half of cases. GPs are by far the most commonly accessed information source by parents in relation to flu vaccine and these findings highlight the need to ensure primary health care providers are adequately supported and resourced to effectively address parent queries. In order to see flu vaccine rates improved in Australia, efforts should be made to better educate health care providers on current evidence-based information with respect to safe and appropriate use of flu vaccine in children.

## Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from January 17 to February 6, 2017, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1,945). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged less than 18 years. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 65%.

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