

# Flu vaccine: Parents' plans for the 2018 season



## Poll report

Flu Poll 2018

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### Report highlights

- Almost half (46%) of parents of young children are planning to have their child immunised against the flu this season, compared with only one in five (22%) in 2017.
- Two-thirds (66%) of parents say having a free flu vaccine makes them more likely to have their child vaccinated against the flu.
- A majority of parents (61%) believe that the flu vaccine is safe for children, compared with only 16% of parents in 2017.
- Parents are more aware of the seriousness of flu, with three out of four parents knowing flu is a serious disease and that kids can get seriously unwell from the flu, compared with only one in three parents in 2017.
- The main concern parents have is how well the vaccine works, with only half (54%) of parents saying they think it works well to protect children from the flu.

In a survey fielded in April 2018, Australian parents were asked to rate their level of agreement with several statements about the benefits and safety of the influenza ('flu') vaccine. They were also asked about their uptake of the flu vaccine for their children and whether having a free flu vaccine affected their decision to vaccinate their child.

Across a nationally representative sample population of 564 parents, data were collected on a total of 729 children aged between six months and five years.

Results were compared with data collected from a nationally representative sample of 878 parents of children aged between six months and five years in January and February 2017.

## Influenza vaccine uptake for Autumn/Winter 2018

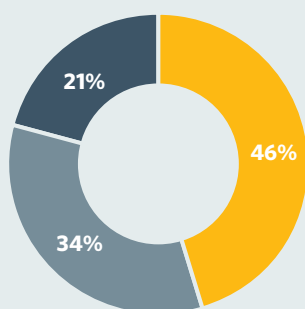
Among the 729 children studied, half (46%) of parents indicated that they had either already had their child vaccinated against flu this year (8%) or intended to have it done (38%). A third (34%) were still undecided about whether or not to have their child vaccinated against the flu and one fifth (21%) said that they did not plan to have their child vaccinated this year (see figure 1). These figures show a notable increase in plans to vaccinate among parents when compared to last flu season, where less than a quarter of parents (22%) indicated plans to vaccinate their child against flu.

Parents with a regular GP providing care to their child were twice as likely to say that they plan to have their child vaccinated against the flu this year than those without a GP.

## Free flu vaccine and impact on uptake

In most Australian states and territories (Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, South Australia and Australian Capital Territory) all children aged between six months and under five years the vaccine is free for kids up to the age of five. From the age of five, parents need to pay. Two out of three (66%) parents of young children said that having a free flu vaccine available for all children under five years made them more likely to get their own child vaccinated against the flu this year. One in five (20%) parents said that their decision about whether or not to vaccinate their child against flu was not affected by the vaccine being free this year and a further 14% were unsure about this (see figure 2).

### Parent plans regarding flu vaccine for their child this winter

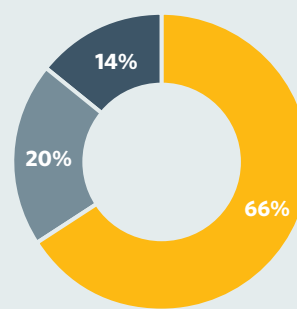


- Parent planning to vaccinate child against flu this season
- Parent unsure whether to vaccinate child against flu this season
- Parent does not plan to have child vaccinated against flu this season

Percentage of parents of children aged six months to <5 years n=564

Figure 1.

### Impact of free flu vaccine on parent plans to vaccinate their child against flu



- Yes, the free vaccine makes me more likely to vaccinate my child against flu
- No, the free vaccine does not affect my decision to vaccinate my child
- I'm not sure how the free flu vaccine impacts my decision to vaccinate my child

Percentage of parents of children aged six months to <5 years n=564

Figure 2.

## Flu vaccine-related perceptions and concerns

### Influenza in children

The results of this poll suggest the level of knowledge and understanding among Australian parents about influenza and the flu vaccine for children has improved compared with this time last year. Three in four parents (73%) are aware that healthy kids can get seriously unwell from the flu, compared with just one in three (32%) parents surveyed last year. Eight in ten (79%) parents are aware that the flu is a serious disease, compared with one in three (32%) surveyed last year.

Children of all ages, including healthy children, are more likely with catch the flu than adults (20–30% of children compared with 10–30% of adults). Healthy children under five are the most likely group to be admitted to hospital for complications related to flu. Children can die from complications related to flu, such as neurological and respiratory complications. Research has shown that about half of the children who are admitted to Intensive Care Units (ICU) or die with flu-related complications were previously healthy, with no underlying medical issues.

### Safety of the flu vaccine

This poll found the majority of Australian parents are confident in the safety of the flu vaccine for children, with 61% believing the flu vaccine is safe for children, compared with just 16% of parents last year.

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 uncomplicated 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.

### Effectiveness of the flu vaccine

A significant number of parents remain uncertain about the effectiveness of the flu vaccine. While most parents (54%) believe the vaccine is effective, 19% of parents think the flu vaccine does not work well to protect children from the flu and a further 27% are unsure about this. Vaccination is the most effective way to protect children from the flu. Research suggests effectiveness of the flu vaccine varies from year to year depending on the age of the child, the strain of the virus and level of herd immunity. Those children vaccinated are less likely to catch the flu and also less likely to develop serious flu-related complications compared with those who are not vaccinated.

## Implications

Influenza or 'the flu' is the leading cause of admission to hospital 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 flu-related complications. About 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.

**Almost half**  
of parents of young  
children plan to give  
their child the flu  
vaccine this year



This poll suggests a positive shift in attitudes and understanding among parents about influenza virus and the flu vaccine, with the majority of parents expressing an understanding of the seriousness and potential severity of the flu in children. Confidence levels in the safety of the vaccine are also higher compared with one year ago. Of concern, almost half of parents remain unsure about the effectiveness of the flu vaccine in children. While the effectiveness of the vaccine varies from year to year, it remains the best strategy available to prevent children from both catching the flu and getting seriously unwell from the flu. The more people who are immunised, the stronger the herd immunity and the more effective the vaccine is in stopping spread of the flu in the community. Continuing efforts are needed to educate families about the flu and flu vaccine to assist parents in making an informed decision about having their child vaccinated against the flu. It is also important for health care providers and the community to harness parents' intentions to vaccinate by supporting them to access vaccination services through their GP, community centre or local council as soon as possible.

**3 in 4** parents are aware healthy kids can get seriously unwell from the flu



This year has seen the introduction of a free flu vaccine for all children aged between six months and under five years in all Australian states and territories except the Northern Territory. Two-thirds of parents of children eligible for the free vaccine indicated that having a free vaccine made them more likely to vaccinate their child against flu this year. These findings suggest a significant and positive impact from the free flu vaccine initiative. A universally funded flu vaccine for Australian children has been on the agenda for some time and these findings reinforce the potential for such a program to substantially increase flu vaccine uptake rates.

## 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 April 4 to April 24, 2018, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1855). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged under 18 years. Data presented in this report is from those parents surveyed with one or more children aged between six months and under five years (n=564). 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 75%.

## References

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