



# Flu vaccine for children: **Parents' plans for 2023**

## Poll report

Dr Anthea Rhodes

Poll 29, May 2023



### **Report highlights**

- Over half of Australian children (57%) are likely to have the flu vaccine in 2023, with likely uptake highest in children under five years old (63%).
- One in four parents (25%) are not sure about vaccinating their child against the flu this year, holding concerns about safety or efficacy of the vaccine.
- One in three parents (36%) are not aware that healthy children can get seriously unwell from the flu.
- More than two in three parents (70%) not intending to get their child vaccinated do not know that the flu vaccine is needed every year.

## About influenza and the flu vaccine

**Influenza (the flu) is a very contagious respiratory virus that is more common during the winter months. Anyone can catch the flu which is spread by body fluids from infected people. Symptoms include fever, body aches, a runny nose and sore throat and can affect other parts of the body. Yearly vaccinations are recommended for everyone aged six months and above and are the best way to prevent severe infections, hospitalisations and death due to flu.<sup>1</sup>**



### What are parents' plans for vaccinating their children this winter?

According to parents surveyed in April 2023, over half of children (57%) aged six months and over are likely to be vaccinated against flu in 2023 with 11% already vaccinated and 46% planned to be (see *figure 1*). Intention to vaccinate is lowest among older children: 55% of children aged 12 years or more and 56% of children aged five to 11 years compared to 63% of children aged six months to five years.

Just under half of children (43%) have parents who are hesitant about vaccinating their children against flu (25% parents unsure, 18% parents not planning to vaccinate).

Parents reported that prior to 2023, 59% of children had received a flu vaccine and among those children, parents indicate that 83% are likely to be vaccinated for flu in 2023. Among those children who have never had a flu vaccine, 21% are likely to be vaccinated according to their parents.

Parents who did not have a regular family GP were more hesitant about getting their child vaccinated for flu (60%) than those with a regular family GP (44%). Parents who resided in regional or remote areas (55%) were more hesitant compared to those in major cities (46%), as were parents who were unemployed (43%) compared to those working part time (52%) or full time (56%). There was no substantial difference in intention based on age of parents, country of birth or language spoken at home.

Parents from Queensland had higher levels of vaccine hesitancy with 56% unlikely to or not sure about getting their child vaccinated against the flu compared to parents from NSW (46%) or Victoria (42%).

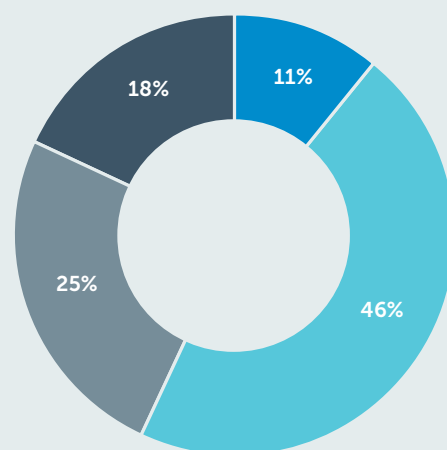
### What do parents know about the flu?

Whilst the majority of parents know that healthy children can catch and get seriously unwell with the flu, one quarter of parents (28%; 21% agree, 7% not sure) falsely believe healthy children are unlikely to catch the flu and one third (36%; (25% agree, 11% not sure) aren't aware children can get seriously unwell from the flu. These knowledge gaps were more common among parents who did not intend to vaccinate their child than among those who had or were likely to vaccinate.

### What do parents know about flu vaccine recommendations?

Lack of awareness that the flu vaccine is recommended every year for children was high among hesitant parents. Seventy-four per cent of parents intending to vaccinate knew that the flu vaccine was necessary each year compared to just 30% of parents hesitant to vaccinate their child against the flu. Over half of parents (56%) know that the flu vaccine is recommended for all children aged six months and above. The majority of

## Plans for flu vaccine uptake in children in 2023, as reported by parents



■ Child has had 2023 flu vaccine  
■ Parent plans to vaccinate for flu in 2023  
■ Parent unsure about vaccinating for flu in 2023  
■ Parent not planning to vaccinate for flu in 2023  
Percentage of children aged 6 months or more (n = 3,289)

Figure 1.

## Reasons parents are hesitant about the flu vaccine for their child

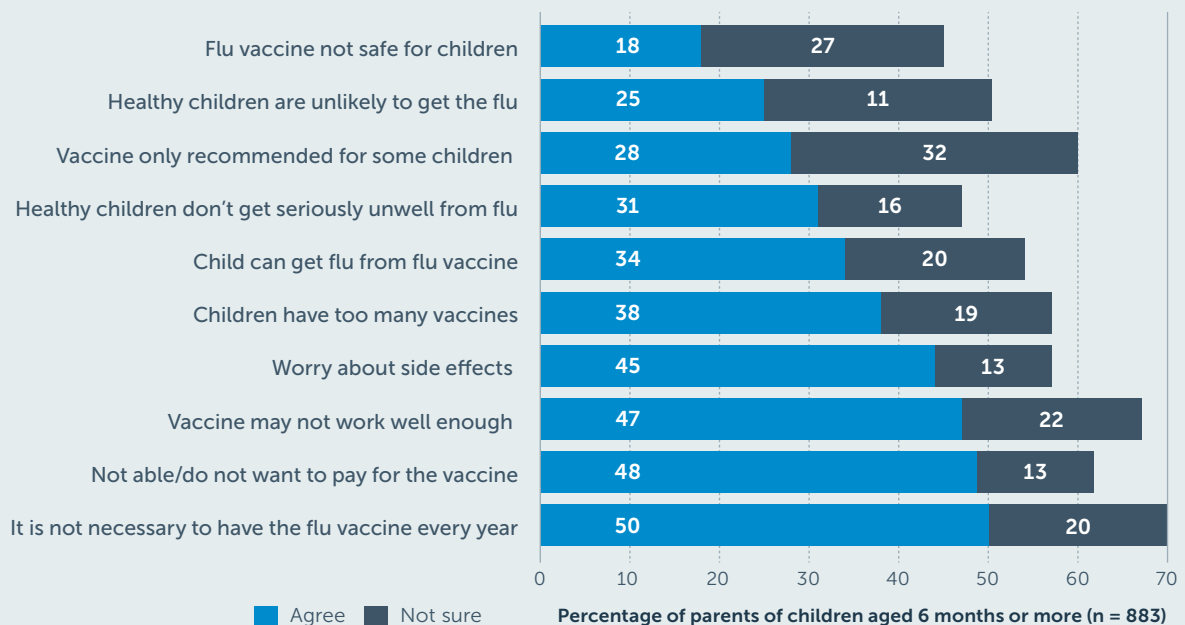


Figure 2.

parents intending to vaccinate their child knew this recommendation (69%). In contrast, less than half (40%) of those hesitant to vaccinate their child knew that the flu vaccine was recommended for all children aged six months and over.

Two-thirds of parents (64%) reported that the flu vaccine was recommended by their health care provider. However, among parents who are not planning to vaccinate their child, 39% report being unsure about whether their healthcare provider recommends the flu vaccine for their child.

### What concerns parents about the flu vaccine?

The 43% of parents who are hesitant (either unsure or not planning) to vaccinate their child against the flu hold a range of concerns and misbeliefs about vaccination (see figure 2). Two-thirds of parents (69%) not intending to vaccinate don't believe or are not sure if the flu vaccine works well enough to be worth having. Over half of parents are worried or unsure about the side effects of flu vaccine in children (58%) or believe that children get too many vaccines and don't want their child to get the flu vaccine (57%). Other concerns held by hesitant parents related to safety of the vaccine including over half of parents mistakenly believing or not sure if children can get the flu from the vaccine (54%) or that flu vaccine is not safe (45%).

Over half of parents hesitant about the flu vaccine did not realise that it is safe to have the flu vaccine and the COVID-19 vaccine at the same time (59%) or believed that the flu vaccine is not as important as the COVID-19 vaccine (56%).

### What are parents' views on the cost of the flu vaccine?

Flu vaccine is free for all children aged six months to less than five years. For those children aged over five years, cost was identified as a potential barrier to flu vaccine uptake, with 60% of parents indicating they either were not able to pay or did not wish to pay for the vaccine. Cost related concerns were similar among parents of children aged over five years who were intending to vaccinate (60%) and those hesitant about vaccination (61%).

### Implications

Seasonal influenza (flu) is a major public health problem affecting thousands of people worldwide each year, including Australians. Flu is the leading cause of vaccine preventable hospitalisations and deaths in children aged less than five years in Australia.<sup>2</sup> Due to COVID-19 stay at home restrictions, closed international borders and lower flu vaccination rates, we've seen lower levels of influenza virus circulating in Australia in the last few years. This has resulted in a lower level of immunity in the population compared to previous years, putting

people at risk of an early and more severe flu season. It's more important than ever that children receive the flu vaccine this year.

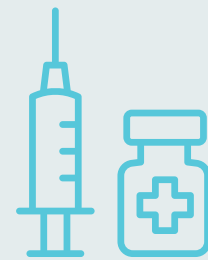
This Poll found that although slightly more parents intend to vaccinate their child against flu in 2023 than in previous years, almost half remain hesitant to vaccinate, with one fifth not planning to take up the flu vaccine for their child and an additional one quarter of parents unsure. Parents have concerning gaps in their knowledge with one third not aware that flu can make otherwise healthy children seriously unwell and one quarter unaware that healthy children can catch the flu. These knowledge gaps, along with commonly-held misbeliefs about the necessity of annual vaccination, how well the vaccine works (efficacy) and side-effects, are associated with parents' hesitancy to get their child vaccinated against the flu.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, there are concerns about how the onset of flu season may compound ongoing challenges in the health system. We may see peaks of flu, COVID-19, RSV and other childhood respiratory viruses at the same time, which could make individual children seriously unwell, and overwhelm the healthcare system. Proven public health measures such as vaccination and improved hygiene can substantially reduce the impact of these infectious diseases on children and their families. Keeping children well will help ensure they don't miss out on attending school and social activities.

As winter rapidly approaches, healthcare providers should actively promote flu vaccination, especially to families who are unsure or have not vaccinated in the past. Public health campaigns need to educate parents on the risks of flu in children, the need for annual vaccination due to waning immunity and new flu strains, and about the effectiveness and safety of the flu vaccine. Parents may benefit from new campaigns to help improve knowledge about flu and flu vaccine so they are able to make decisions on vaccination based on scientific information and evidence.

Cost continues to play a role in reduced uptake of the vaccine for a large proportion of parents of older children, suggesting free flu vaccine for all children should be considered as a means to increase uptake in children over five years.

**Over half of Australian children are likely to have the flu vaccine in 2023, with uptake highest in children under five years old**



## Data source and methods



The influenza (flu) vaccine is recommended for babies and children every year, from the time they are six months old. It is free in Australia for all children aged six months to under five years. The 2023 seasonal flu vaccine has been available for children in Australia since April this year.

In April 2023 we surveyed a nationally representative sample (by age, sex and state of residence) of Australian parents of children aged between six months and 17 years about whether they intended to get their child vaccinated against flu this season and if their child had ever received the flu vaccine. Parents provided information about their knowledge of the flu and flu vaccine by rating their level of agreement with statements about the flu and the need, efficacy and safety of the flu vaccine.

Data were collected from a sample of 2,001 parents on 3,289 children aged between six months and 17 years.

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 11-21 April, 2023, to a randomly selected, stratified nationally representative sample of adults aged 18 and older (n = 2,001). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between six months and less than 18 years. Respondents provided data on a collective total of 3,289 children. 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 77%.

## References



1. Flu (Influenza). Healthdirect fact sheet. Australian Government Department of Health. [www.healthdirect.gov.au/flu](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/flu)
2. Dey A, Knox S, Wang H, Beard F, McIntyre P. *Summary of national surveillance data on vaccine preventable diseases in Australia, 2008–2011*. Commun Dis Intell Q Rep, 40 (2016), pp. S1–S70

## Suggested citation



The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll. (2023). *Flu vaccine for children: Parents' plans for 2023*. Poll Number 29. The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

## Authors



This report was written by:  
**Dr Anthea Rhodes** (RCH Poll Director),  
**Dr Mary-Anne Measey** (Research Associate) and  
**Dr Monsurul Hoq** (Biostatistician)  
with the support of the [RCH Poll Project Team](#)

The RCH Poll team acknowledges Dr Jessica Kaufman and Associate Professor Margie Danchin for their input in the survey development.