



Flu is back: It's not too late to vaccinate

Poll report

Dr Anthea Rhodes

Poll 32, May 2024



Report highlights

- Flu season is well underway, with cases rising and many children getting infected¹
- One in three of all flu cases in 2024 so far have been in children aged under 15 years¹
- Flu vaccine uptake in children is currently low²
- Parents have low levels of knowledge about flu and the flu vaccine for children
- Over one third of all parents (36%) do not know that healthy children can get seriously unwell from the flu
- It's not too late to vaccinate – children need to be vaccinated now to protect them this winter

What is the flu?

Influenza (flu) is a highly contagious viral infection of the respiratory tract that can cause severe illness and life-threatening complications. Flu affects children of all ages, and those aged under five years are more likely to contract the virus and become very unwell.³

The flu is seasonal, with infections highest from June to September. On average each year in Australia, influenza causes approximately 100 deaths and 5,100 hospitalisations.³

Healthy people, including children, can get very unwell and even die from the flu. Vaccination against the flu substantially reduces the chance of catching the flu and reduces the severity of symptoms, including serious illness and death. Children who are not vaccinated are at greater risk of complications of the flu. It is recommended that **everyone aged over six months receives an annual flu vaccine.^{3,4}**



The flu in 2024

As of 28 May 2024, there have been 20,888 flu cases reported in children aged under 15 years, accounting for one in three (32%) cases in people of all ages across Australia.¹ The true number of cases is likely much higher as this figure only represents laboratory confirmed cases.

During the first quarter of 2024, Australia experienced more than a 20% increase in cases of flu in children aged under 15 years than for the same period in 2023.¹

As of 25 May 2024, only 14% of children aged under five years and 8% of children aged five to fifteen years have been vaccinated against the flu.²

Parent knowledge about the flu and flu vaccine

The RCH National Child Health Poll has uncovered concerning gaps in the knowledge of parents about the flu and flu vaccine, which may be contributing to low numbers of children being vaccinated against the flu. In an online representative survey of 2,001 Australian parents of children aged six months to less than 18 years conducted in 2023, parents were asked a series of questions about the flu in children, and about flu vaccine recommendations.

Do parents know children can get seriously unwell from the flu?

Over one third of all parents (36%) do not know that healthy children can get seriously unwell from the flu. Whilst children with chronic (long-lasting) medical conditions are more likely to get seriously unwell from the flu, healthy children, especially young children, can get also get very sick from flu and may even require a stay in hospital.⁴

Do parents know the flu vaccine recommendations?

Over half of all parents (54%) do not know the flu vaccine is needed every year. The flu vaccine is recommended every year because different strains of the virus emerge each year. Occasionally one of these strains can cause a more widespread or severe outbreak.⁴

Almost half (44%) of all parents do not know the flu vaccine is recommended for all children aged six months and over. Children are particularly susceptible to the flu and its complications because their immune systems are still developing. Additionally, children often have close contact with others in school and early learning or childcare settings, increasing their chances of exposure to the virus.

Implications

The 2024 flu season has commenced with 20% more cases in children aged less than 15 years than for the same time last year.¹ Of concern, the proportion of children who have been vaccinated against flu this year so far is low. Low levels of vaccination mean that many children across the population are susceptible to catching and becoming more seriously unwell with the flu.

Many parents have low levels of knowledge about the flu and do not know that the flu vaccine is recommended for all children aged six months and over every year. Misunderstandings among parents about the recommendations for flu vaccine are likely contributing to the low childhood vaccination rates observed so far in 2024. Health professionals including GPs and pharmacists can assist in improving vaccination rates by promoting and discussing the flu vaccine with parents and addressing any concerns they might have. Public health campaigns and communication strategies should focus on improving parent knowledge about the flu in children and providing practical advice about where and how to get children vaccinated against flu this winter.

It is not too late for parents to vaccinate their children, as the peak of the season has not yet occurred. In Australia, the flu vaccine is free for all children aged six months to less than five years and people with certain medical conditions.³ Vaccinating children not only helps to protect them from getting sick but also helps to prevent the spread of the flu to others.

Half of parents
(54%) don't know
that the **flu vaccine**
is recommended
for **all children**
every year.



Data source and methods



This report includes findings from a nationally representative survey of Australian parents conducted exclusively for The Royal Children’s Hospital (RCH) National Child Health Poll as well as publicly available information from the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System and the Australian Immunisation Register.^{1,2}

In April 2023 the RCH National Child Health Poll surveyed a nationally representative sample (by age, sex and state of residence) of Australian parents of children aged less than 18 years and asked them questions designed to assess their knowledge of the flu and flu vaccine recommendations.

Data were collected online between 11 and 21 April 2023, from a randomly selected stratified sample of 2,001 parents of 3,289 children aged between six months and 17 years by the Online Research Unit. The data were subsequently weighted to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate, the completion rate was 77%.

References



1. Australian Government Department of Health, 2024. NNDSS data visualization tool. Available at: www.health.gov.au/resources/apps-and-tools/nndss-data-visualisation [Accessed 28 May 2024].
2. National Centre for Immunisation Surveillance and Research: influenza vaccination coverage data. Available at <https://ncirs.org.au/influenza-vaccination-coverage-data/national-influenza-vaccination-coverage-all-people-age-group> [Accessed 27 May 2024]
3. Flu (Influenza). Health direct fact sheet. Australian Government Department of Health. www.healthdirect.gov.au/flu [Accessed 15 May 2024]
4. The Royal Children’s Hospital, 2024. “Influenza (the Flu).” Kids Health Info. Available at: www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/influenza_the_flu/

For a full list of references contact rch.poll@rch.org.au

Suggested citation



The Royal Children’s Hospital National Child Health Poll. (2024). *Flu is back: It’s not too late to vaccinate*. Poll number 32, May 2024. The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

Authors and acknowledgements



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

The RCH Poll team acknowledges Professor Margie Danchin and Dr Jess Kaufman for their contribution to the survey development.

The RCH National Child Health Poll is funded by the **RCH Foundation**.