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## Why immunisation is important

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### Summary

- Immunisation saves lives. It protects you, your family and your community. And it also helps protect future generations by eradicating diseases.
  - The National Immunisation Program is one of the biggest public health programs in Australia.
  - Many infectious diseases are rare or eradicated now as a result of our immunisation programs, but new infectious diseases are appearing around the world.
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### Immunisation is important

**Immunisation** is one of the best ways you can protect yourself, your children and future generations from infectious diseases. In other words, if you vaccinate, you help wipe out disease that could spread now and into the future.

By making sure you and your family are fully vaccinated (this means following the **National Immunisation Program schedule** set by the Australian Government), you are not only looking after your own family but also protecting vulnerable people in your community.

And you are also helping to wipe out these infectious diseases altogether. That is, the more people who vaccinate, and thus the fewer people who are infected, the less widely can a disease spread.

Immunisation saves lives. As recently as the 1950s, thousands of children died every year from diseases such as tetanus, diphtheria and whooping cough (pertussis). Luckily, it is rare for anyone in Australia to die from these infectious diseases now, thanks to the major vaccination programs introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, which continue today.

### So, how do vaccinations work?

All immunisations work in the same way. The **vaccination** uses your body's **immune system** to increase protection to an infection before you come into contact with that infection. In other words, it is like being infected by the disease without suffering the actual symptoms.

If you come into contact with an infection after you've been vaccinated, your body works to stop you from getting the disease, or you may get just a mild case. Unlike other proposed approaches to immunisation (such as homeopathy), vaccinations have been rigorously tested to demonstrate their safety and effectiveness in protecting against infectious disease.

### And what about people who cannot be immunised?

Some people in our community cannot be vaccinated. This might be because they are too young or too sick. You can help protect these vulnerable people by keeping yours and your family's vaccinations up to date.

When enough people in the community are vaccinated, the spread of a disease slows down or stops completely. So as long as enough people are vaccinated, the disease will not spread. This is called **herd immunity**.

### Modern outbreaks of infectious diseases

Many infectious diseases are rare or not around anymore, thanks to vaccination. But there are still infectious disease outbreaks happening around the world today.

- **Flu, chicken pox, whooping cough and measles** – These diseases still have occasional outbreaks in Australia, mainly when introduced from overseas. They could make a strong comeback if people stop vaccinating.

- **Zika** – You may have heard about the Zika virus in the news. The World Health Organisation declared in February 2016 that the Zika virus is an international public health emergency, following outbreaks in Central and South America. The virus is likely to spread to new areas, but is not a current strong threat in Australia.
- **Ebola** – An outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa, which started in March 2014, has now been controlled but surveillance continues in affected areas.
- **HIV/AIDS** – The first cases of HIV/AIDS were identified in the gay community in America in 1981 and, by 1985, at least one case had been reported from each region of the world. Today, more than 35 million people around the world live with HIV/AIDS. There is still no cure, but current treatments allow patients to live long and healthy lives.

No vaccines exist for Zika, Ebola or HIV/AIDS, but research is underway.

### Immunisation surveillance

To keep you, your family and your community safe, governments need a complete picture of immunisation. And that is where immunisation surveillance comes in. Immunisation surveillance involves researching and collating information on immunisation programs.

Many countries have an official immunisation surveillance body (for example, the CDC in the United States). Australia has one too, called the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS).

The NCIRS was set up in 1997 as an independent expert on immunisation and focuses on:

- surveillance of vaccine preventable diseases
- vaccination coverage and adverse events
- program evaluations
- social research.

### How new vaccines are developed

It takes a long time to develop a new vaccine, usually between 10 and 15 years. The development process is rigorous and the vaccine is constantly monitored – even after it is being used – to make sure it is safe and effective.

A new vaccine goes through many phases of development, including research, discovery, pre-clinical testing, clinical testing (which can take up to seven years) and regulatory approval. Once the vaccine is approved (another lengthy process of up to two years), the vaccine is then manufactured and shipped to where it's needed.

After vaccines are introduced into immunisation schedules, they are closely monitored through trials and surveillance to see if they are effective and safe. In Australia, there are regional and national surveillance systems actively looking for any adverse events following immunisation. This is necessary, as sometimes unexpected side effects occur after vaccines are registered for use.

Some vaccines, such as the flu vaccination, need to be updated every year to respond to changing infection strains and conditions. For these updates, the process is compressed to ensure the vaccine is available as needed.

### Who needs to be vaccinated?

The answer is simple – almost **everyone!**. There are some exceptions – usually people with a serious medical condition (for example, a weak immune system).

But don't ever decide against immunisation without checking first with your GP: everyone needs to ask. Your doctor will advise which vaccinations you need based on your HALO: health condition, age, lifestyle and occupation.

If 95 per cent of us are vaccinated, the spread of disease is reduced, which helps to protect everyone. But vaccination is particularly recommended if you:

- are a newborn or young child (as per the NIP schedule)
- have a **new born baby**
- are **pregnant or planning for a baby**
- are caring for very young babies (for example, parents, grandparents and carers)

- are an older person
- are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child or adult
- have plans to travel outside Australia (ask your travel agent or check on the [Smart Traveller](#) website)
- are medically at risk due to certain conditions (such as asthma) or treatment.

Remember, if you are not sure about what immunisations you need, talk with to your GP. If you find you are not up to date with your vaccinations, your GP will tell you about [catch-up and booster shots](#).

### Where can I get more information about immunisation?

#### Health professionals

Find out more about immunisation by speaking with your health professional. The best place to start is with your GP. You can also ask your maternal and child health nurse and paediatrician.

#### Online information

There is also lots of information online. If you would like to know more about immunisation, check out the Australian Government's information on [frequently asked questions](#), the [safety of vaccines](#), and [immunisation myths](#).

When looking for immunisation information, stick to reliable information providers, such as:

- Better Health Channel
- [Raising Children Network](#)
- [Melbourne Vaccine Education Centre \(MVEC\)](#)
- [NPS Medicinewise](#)
- [National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance \(NCIRS\)](#).

#### Telephone

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Immunisation Program, Department of Health & Human Services, Victorian Government Tel. 1300 882 008
- National Immunisation Information Line Tel. 1800 671 811
- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- SAEFVIC Tel. 1300 882 924 – the line is attended between 10 am and 3.30 pm and you can leave a message at all other times

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