
Immunisations for older people

Summary

- As you get older, immunisations are still important because your immune system can become less effective at protecting you from some diseases.
 - Immunisation is a proven and safe way to protect yourself against diseases that can cause serious illness, and sometimes even death. Not only can you protect yourself from diseases, but you can also help stop the spread of diseases, protecting others in your community too.
 - The Australian Government gives some immunisations for older people at no charge under its National Immunisation Program (NIP).
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Immunisations are important for older people

We know immunisations are important to protect babies and children against preventable diseases, but did you know immunisations for older people are equally important? As you get older, your immune system can become less effective at protecting you from some diseases.

Immunisation is a proven and safe way to protect yourself against diseases that can cause serious illness, and sometimes even death. Not only can you protect yourself from diseases, but you can also help stop the spread of diseases by protecting others in your community too.

Immunisations for older people have been overlooked for a long time, but we now know we can prevent many diseases that can cause big problems later in life. This can help you live a longer, healthier and more comfortable life.

Immunisation prevents unnecessary illness and death

Although immunisation has virtually eliminated some serious diseases such as poliomyelitis (polio) and diphtheria in Australia, there are other infections that can be avoided through vaccination.

Cases of vaccine preventable diseases are on the rise. According to the **Australia's health 2014** report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, cases of illnesses that could have been prevented with immunisation increased 70 per cent in a year.

Some experts believe case numbers may be under reported because they are not attributed to the actual cause, which may be an infection. Those with an existing medical condition can be admitted to hospital or die due to complications resulting from preventable infections such as **influenza**, **pneumococcal disease**, **whooping cough** and **shingles**.

It is never too late to vaccinate

Some diseases are more dangerous to older people than they are to the general population. Even diseases that don't pose a serious threat to older Australians can be spread by lack of immunisation and affect others who might be more vulnerable, such as young babies.

If you missed some immunisations as a child, it is even more crucial to your health and the health of others for you to be protected. It is never too late to start protecting yourself.

Older people can catch infections more easily than younger people, and it can take a lot longer to recover. You can also lose the immunity you may have had when you were younger, meaning you could catch diseases you thought you couldn't catch.

The good news is that you can protect yourself against many of these diseases with a simple vaccination. Common diseases you can protect yourself against are **tetanus**, **diphtheria**, **influenza**, **pneumococcal disease**, **whooping cough** and **shingles**.

What immunisations do you need?

The immunisations you may need are decided by your health, age, lifestyle, and occupation.

Together, these factors are known as HALO. Your **GP (doctor)** will consider these factors when recommending immunisations for you. You can check your immunisation HALO using the **Immunisation for Life** downloadable poster.

Some immunisations are free of charge

The Australian Government gives some immunisations for older people at no charge under its **National Immunisation Program (NIP)**.

The following immunisations are free:

- **herpes-zoster (shingles)** – for people aged 70 years (also available until 2021 for anyone aged 71–79 years)
- **influenza (flu)** – is an annual vaccine for people aged 65 years and over, or 50 years and over for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. You will need to get this every year
- **pneumococcal** – for people aged 65 years and over, or 50 years and over for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Your GP will advise if you need a second dose after five years if they feel you are at risk
- **measles-mumps-rubella (MMR)** – one or two doses of MMR vaccine are available for all people born during or since 1966 without evidence of two documented doses of valid MMR vaccine or without a blood test showing evidence of immunity to measles, mumps and rubella. If two MMR doses are required they should be given a minimum of 28 days apart.

These vaccinations are provided free for people in the specified age groups because they can get very sick, or even die, if they are unprotected. Ask your GP about your vaccine needs.

Other immunisations you may need

The Australian Government also recommends adults get a **dTpa vaccine booster** dose, which is a diphtheria-tetanus-whooping cough booster, if you haven't had one in the past 10 years. This immunisation isn't covered by the NIP though, so you will have to pay.

Whooping cough (or pertussis) spreads easily and can cause severe illness, and even death, especially in young babies under six months of age. Women in their third trimester of pregnancy are recommended the whooping cough vaccine to protect their baby in the first months of life before the baby starts vaccination.

Even if you were immunised as a child, or if you had whooping cough, your immunity can wear off. Adults who are going to be around a new baby, such as grandparents, should get a whooping cough booster to ensure the new baby is as safe as possible from this terrible disease.

If you are the primary carer or legal guardian of your grandchild, you can get the dTpa booster at no cost. Otherwise, you can ask your GP for a prescription and buy the vaccine at a pharmacy.

Your GP may recommend other vaccinations for you, depending on your HALO factors. These recommendations will vary from person to person. For instance, you may be planning to **travel overseas** and may need to be immunised against certain diseases that are prevalent in the countries you are visiting.

Talk to your GP to arrange your vaccination. Keep in mind that you may have to pay consultation fees to see your doctor, even if your vaccination is free, so be sure to ask when you make an appointment.

The **Immunisation for Life** infographic shows the factors that are considered when determining your immunisation needs. Click on the vaccines listed in the infographic for more information about that vaccine.

Where can I get more information about immunisation?

Find out more about immunisation by speaking with your health professional. The best place to start is with

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

your GP. You can also ask your clinic nurse or **specialist**.

There is also lots of information online. If you would like to know more about immunisation, check out the **Australian Government's National Immunisation Program** website.

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

- **Better Health Channel**
- **Melbourne Vaccine Education Centre** (MVEC)
- **NPS Medicinewise**
- **National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance** (NCIRS)
- **Australian Academy of Science – The science of immunisation.**
- **Australian Government Department of Health – Questions about vaccination**

Where to get help

- Your **doctor**
- **Pharmacist**
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Your local government immunisation service
- **Maternal and Child Health Line** (24 hours) Tel. **132 229**
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. **1300 60 60 24** – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- **Immunisation Section, Department of Health and Human Services, Victorian Government** Tel. **1300 882 008**
- **National Immunisation Information Line** Tel. **1800 671 811**
- **Victorian vaccine safety service (SAEFVIC)** Tel. **1300 882 924** – (select option 1) the line is attended between 9 am and 4 pm. L(leave a message at all other times)

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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