

Pneumococcal disease

Immunisation information

The National Immunisation Program Schedule provides free pneumococcal vaccine for all adults aged 65 years and older; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and older and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 to 49 years and children aged four to five years with high risk underlying medical conditions.

Pneumococcal disease

Pneumococcal disease refers to a range of illnesses that affect various parts of the body and are caused by infection with the bacterium *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. Illnesses range from mild infections to life-threatening infections that include:

- Middle ear infection
- Pneumonia
- Bloodstream infection
- Meningitis

Pneumococcal disease is a leading cause of serious illness and death among Australian children aged under five years. It is an important cause of pneumonia in adults 65 years of age or older, and the elderly are especially at risk of death from this disease. It is estimated to kill around one million people worldwide every year.

Most people carry *Streptococcus pneumoniae* bacteria in the nose and throat. Most of the time this doesn't cause any illness. However vulnerable people such as the very young, the elderly and those with chronic disease may develop pneumococcal disease.

While pneumococcal disease can occur at any time, infections seem to be more common during winter and spring. Young children, the elderly and people with impaired immune systems are among the most susceptible.

There are currently 90 different strains of *Streptococcus pneumoniae* recognised and no vaccine can protect against all of them. However two vaccines are available to help prevent infection with the most common strains.

The risk of infection in young children, especially in children younger than two years, can be substantially reduced with a vaccine called **Prevenar®** (see the Childhood Pneumococcal Disease fact sheet for more information about Prevenar® vaccine).

The **Pneumovax 23®** vaccine will protect all older age groups.

Who can receive free pneumococcal vaccine?

The following groups are those eligible for **free pneumococcal vaccine**:

- Everyone aged 65 years and older
- Inpatients and outpatients with high risk underlying medical conditions (in the public hospital setting)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged between 15 and 49 years with health risks and those aged 50 years and older
- Children at four to five years of age with high risk underlying medical conditions (these children will have already completed a course of Prevenar® vaccine)

Who else should be immunised?

The **Pneumovax 23®** vaccine is also recommended for the following people:

- People aged 10 years and over with serious health problems, such as heart or lung disease, diabetes or kidney disease
- People aged 10 years and over with illnesses that reduce immunity to infections, such as leukaemia or HIV or who are being treated with drugs that suppress the immune system
- Transplant recipients or people with a damaged (or no) spleen
- People aged 10 years and over with a CSF leak
- Tobacco smokers

Even though the pneumococcal vaccine is recommended for the above people, it is not always a free vaccine for these people. The vaccine is available with a doctors prescription.

Pneumovax 23[®] vaccine

Pneumovax 23[®] vaccine is made of antigens from the 23 most common types of pneumococcal bacteria plus salt water and a small amount of preservative called Phenol.

A booster dose of Pneumovax 23[®] is required following the initial dose. Revaccination should not occur within three years of a previous dose because of the increased risk of local reactions. Your doctor or nurse will advise you of the next time a booster dose is due as this can vary depending on the age when the vaccine was first given.

Possible side effects of Pneumovax 23[®] vaccine.

Common side effects:

- About 50 percent experience soreness in the arm
- Redness and swelling at the injection site
- Slight fever (below 39°C)
- A temporary small lump at the injection site

If mild reactions do occur, they may last one to two days. The side effects can be reduced by:

- Placing a cold wet cloth on the sore injection site
- Not overdressing
- Taking paracetamol to lower fever and reduce pain
- Having extra fluids to drink

Extremely rare side effect:

- Severe allergic reaction

If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor or hospital.

Pre-immunisation checklist

Before you or your child are immunised, tell the doctor or nurse if any of the following apply:

- Unwell on the day of immunisation
- Has had a severe reaction to any vaccine
- Allergic to any component of the vaccine
- Under two years of age
- Recent use of immunosuppressants or radiation of lymph nodes. However, once immunologically 'stabilised' prompt vaccination is recommended



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