



## Australian Government

### Department of Health

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

#### Important information about the 2015 Seasonal Influenza Vaccine

- The National Immunisation Program has been extended to include influenza vaccine for all **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children** six months to less than five years of age.
- The 2015 seasonal influenza vaccination program will commence on **20 April 2015** due to manufacturing delays associated with new virus strains.
- **bioCSL Fluvax® must not be provided to children less than five years of age.** There are alternative vaccines available for use in children. bioCSL Fluvax® is also **not recommended for use in children aged five to nine years** due to the higher risk of fever in this age group.

Dear Colleague

As part of your practice, you play a key role in informing the community about risks from influenza and of the importance of influenza vaccination.

Vaccination remains the best protection we have against influenza. The effectiveness of influenza vaccines depends on the age and immunocompetence of the recipient and the degree of similarity between the virus strains in the vaccine and those circulating in the community. Further information about the effectiveness of the influenza vaccine is available in *The Australian Immunisation Handbook 10th Edition* and in the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) Statement on the website [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

#### **Seasonal influenza vaccine for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

In 2015, the National Immunisation Program has been expanded to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged six months to less than five years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are five times more likely to die from influenza than non-Indigenous children, and are much more likely to be hospitalised than others who have access to free vaccine.

Under the National Immunisation Program, the following Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are eligible to receive free influenza vaccine:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged six months to less than five years.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over.
- People aged six months and over with one of the following medical conditions:
  - Heart disease.
  - Lung conditions, such as asthma.
  - Chronic illnesses that mean you have to see a doctor more often, such as diabetes.
  - Chronic diseases of the nervous system.
  - Low immunity.
  - Renal disease and failure.
- Pregnant women.

Influenza vaccination is strongly recommended for pregnant women. Pregnant women are at increased risk of severe disease or complications from influenza infection but vaccination rates of pregnant women in Australia are very low. There is also a growing body of evidence showing that influenza vaccination of pregnant women protects infants against influenza for the first six months after birth. There is no preference for the brand of influenza vaccine administered, and vaccination is safe at any stage of pregnancy.

### ***Delay to the start of the 2015 Seasonal Influenza Vaccine Program***

Two of the strains in the 2015 trivalent seasonal influenza vaccine differ from those in the 2014 vaccine. This double strain change for the 2015 influenza vaccine has resulted in a delay in the supply of National Immunisation Program 2015 seasonal influenza vaccine. As a result, in 2015 the seasonal influenza vaccination program will commence on 20 April 2015. This will not affect vaccine supply volumes, and no vaccine shortages are anticipated. The 20 April is a notional start date of the program. If you have the influenza vaccine in your practice and you have someone with you who is eligible for the vaccine under the National Immunisation Program, then you should administer it to them, not wait until 20 April. Once again I stress that if the product you have is bioCSL Fluvax, then it must not be administered to any child under the age of five and is not recommended for use in children aged five to nine years.

Given the two strain changes of the 2015 trivalent influenza vaccine, it is especially important that those at risk be vaccinated.

### ***Influenza vaccine for young children***

Children aged six months to less than nine years who receive the influenza vaccine for the first time are recommended to receive two doses of influenza vaccine at least four weeks apart in the first year and one dose in subsequent years. The second dose should be administered even if it is late in the influenza season, as it primes the immune system for later years. While two doses in the first year is recommended, one dose does provide some protection and is preferable to no doses. If a child aged six months to nine years does not receive the second dose within the same year, the child should have two doses administered the following year. Further information is available in *The Australian Immunisation Handbook 10th Edition*, the ATAGI statement and the *Guidelines for second dose influenza vaccination*, on the Immunise Australia website [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

**bioCSL Fluvax® is not registered for use in children less than five years of age and must not be given in this age group.** In addition, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation does **not recommend the use of bioCSL Fluvax® in children aged five to nine years** due to a potential increased risk of fever. However, febrile convulsions are rare in this age group. The use of bioCSL Fluvax® in children aged five to nine years should only be considered after careful review of the potential benefits and risks.

If you do administer bioCSL's Fluvax® to a child under five years of age, this would constitute "off-label use" which may expose you to legal risk. The Commonwealth does not encourage such "off-label use" and the Commonwealth cannot accept liability for the consequences arising from administration of bioCSL's Fluvax® to a child under five. If you have any concerns you should seek your own legal advice.

To ensure accurate monitoring of influenza vaccine usage in children, you should inform the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register when you administer any influenza vaccine to a child aged up to seven years.

### ***Reporting of adverse events***

I encourage you to report any adverse events following immunisation at any age to the Therapeutic Goods Administration. Go to the "reporting problems" link via its website at [www.tga.gov.au](http://www.tga.gov.au) or report adverse events through the usual reporting mechanisms in your state or territory.

I have enclosed a 2015 seasonal influenza poster. You can order more posters and a range of printable fact sheets from the Immunise Australia website at [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au) or by calling 1800 671 811. Please share this information with others in your practice (including locums) who administer or prescribe immunisations.

Yours sincerely



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