



National Pneumococcal Vaccination Program for Older Australians

FACT SHEET

What is the National Pneumococcal Vaccination Program for Older Australians?

In order to reduce the impact of pneumococcal disease, the National Pneumococcal Vaccination Program for Older Australians will provide **free pneumococcal vaccine** to adults 65 years or over from 1 January 2005.

Why do I need vaccination against pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease comprises a range of infections and can be life-threatening. Pneumococcal disease does not just affect children. People over the age of 65 years and young children under the age of 2 are at higher risk of contracting pneumococcal disease than the rest of the population. Even healthy persons aged 65 or over are at greater risk of contracting the disease.

In 2003, there were 602 cases of serious pneumococcal disease, and 90 deaths, in Australians aged 65 years or over.

Indigenous Australians are also more at risk than non-Indigenous Australians. For this reason, free vaccine is also available through the National Indigenous Pneumococcal and Influenza Immunisation Program for all Indigenous people over the age of 50 years and those aged 15 to 49 years who have medical risk factors.

In adults, pneumococcal pneumonia is the most common form of serious (invasive) pneumococcal disease. It usually requires hospitalisation. Other forms of pneumococcal disease are infection around the brain (meningitis) and blood poisoning (septicaemia).

Pneumococcal disease can occur at any time of the year, although infections seem to be more common during winter and spring. Vaccination will help protect you against pneumococcal disease.

Signs and symptoms

Pneumococcal disease can cause a range of illnesses depending on which part of the body is infected, for example:

- **Pneumonia** - lung infection. Symptoms include fever, cough, chest pains and breathing problems, such as shortness of breath.
- **Meningitis** - infection of the membranes (meninges) that enclose the brain and spinal cord. Symptoms include high fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea and vomiting, and sometimes coma.
- **Bacteraemia** - bacteria invade the blood (also known as septicaemia); this is a serious condition. Symptoms include fever, headache and muscular aches and pains.

How often do I need to be vaccinated?

The recommended schedule for vaccinations in the 65 years or over age group is one dose on or near 65 years, then a single booster dose 5 years later.

If you have received a pneumococcal vaccination within the last 5 years, you should consult your general practitioner or other immunisation provider about whether you require revaccination at this time. Revaccination within three years is not recommended due to the increased risk of local reactions.

What's the difference between pneumococcal and meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by different bacteria to pneumococcal disease. While meningococcal disease can affect all age groups, it primarily affects children under five years and young people in the 15 to 24 year age groups. Meningococcal disease normally presents as inflammation around the brain (meningitis) and blood poisoning (septicaemia).

How are pneumococcal bacteria spread?

The bacteria are spread in droplets shed from the mouth or nose through coughing, sneezing or contact with articles that have been contaminated with infected droplets. Most of the time, this doesn't cause any illness in healthy persons, however, people in high risk categories and those with reduced immunity

may develop pneumococcal disease. Infection occurs when the pneumococcal germ invades the body from the throat or nose, or is inhaled into the lungs. The incubation time (time taken for the germ to cause signs and symptoms) for pneumococcal disease can be as short as 24 hours.

How can I protect myself?

The pneumococcal vaccine used in the Program is called PneumoVax®23. It provides protection against the 23 most common strains of pneumococcal bacteria responsible for most cases of disease in adults in Australia. Because there are a small number of strains that aren't covered by the vaccine, you should always seek medical help if you develop any of the signs and symptoms of pneumococcal disease, even if you have been vaccinated.

The pneumococcal vaccine can be given at the same time as the influenza vaccine, but remember that influenza vaccination needs to be repeated every year.

If I have previously had a pneumococcal infection do I still need to get vaccinated?

There are many different types of pneumococcal bacteria, and infection with one type doesn't provide immunity against the other types. Therefore, it is recommended that you do receive the vaccination.

Where can I get the vaccine?

The vaccine can be administered by your usual immunisation provider, general practitioner or local health care centre. The vaccine is free if you are 65 years or over. You do not need to purchase the vaccine from a pharmacist.

Does the vaccine have any side effects?

The vaccine is very safe. Some recipients may experience mild side effects following pneumococcal vaccination such as some pain or swelling at the injection site and, occasionally, low-grade fever. Like any medicine, vaccines can cause severe allergic reactions, but the chances are extremely remote.

Further information

In the first instance, you should contact your usual general practitioner or immunisation provider for details of the Program. Alternatively, you can contact your State or Territory health department from the numbers listed below.

State/Territory	Contact Number
Australian Capital Territory	02 6205 2300
New South Wales	Public Health Unit (look under 'Health' in the White Pages)
Northern Territory	08 8922 8044
Queensland	07 3234 1500
South Australia	08 8226 7177
Tasmania	03 6222 7724 or 1800 671 738 (Tasmania only)
Victoria	1300 882 008
Western Australia	08 9321 1312

Further information is also available from the Immunisation Infoline on **1800 671 811** or the Immunise Australia Program website at:

<http://immunise.health.gov.au/olderaus/pneumococcal.htm>

Note: The National Indigenous Pneumococcal and Influenza Immunisation Program provides free pneumococcal vaccine to all Indigenous people over 50 years and those 15 to 49 years with risk factors. The risk factors include chronic illnesses such as compromised immune systems, HIV infection, acute kidney disease, alcohol-related problems, heart or lung disease and smoking.