

Study: Immunization rates could drop during pandemic, creating future disease outbreaks

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There are fears parents will skip vital vaccinations for their children and that there may be disease outbreaks, because parents are concerned about taking their children to their GP during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This follows new findings from the University of Adelaide that only one third of parents are aware of the recommendation that children should be vaccinated for influenza.

Professor Helen Marshall, Deputy Director of the Robinson Research Institute at the University of Adelaide, said understanding parental awareness towards recommendations was essential in planning and developing strategies to increase uptake.

"Of 539 South Australian parents surveyed, only 33% were aware of the recommendation that all children under the age of five should receive the influenza vaccine annually," Professor Marshall

said.

"These results are raising serious concerns not just about low awareness of the flu vaccination for children, but that parents may now be reluctant to keep up with vaccination schedules.

"Social distancing during COVID-19 is important—but you still must visit your GP for medical reasons, including to have your children vaccinated, with the option to attend council immunisation clinics.

"I am genuinely concerned that parents will delay vaccines and that immunisation rates will drop; they must not let these slip off their radar.

"If this occurs here in Australia, then we risk outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases such as measles, mumps and even meningitis."

Vaccinating children against influenza protects them but also prevents transmission of influenza in the community which is so important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professor Marshall said that targeted communication strategies and resources were required to establish broader community awareness of recommendations, particularly for children's [influenza](#) vaccines.

"Healthcare provider endorsement of the vaccine remains key and [health care professionals](#), particularly GPs and paediatric specialists should be encouraged to discuss [influenza vaccine](#) with parents at every opportunity," she said.

"We also found that some [parents](#) think that if their child is healthy, and other children are vaccinated against flu, then they don't need to have their own

children vaccinated.

"This is untrue and dangerous. Healthy children die from flu every year and we need to make sure they are protected."

The researchers believe that comprehensive media and social media advertising could help to establish broader community awareness of recommendations for children's flu vaccinations.

Professor Marshall said since the research was undertaken in 2016, the Federal Government had introduced free flu vaccinations for children from age six months to under five years through the National Immunisation Program.

"Ideally we would like to see 100% of children under the age of five receive the free flu vaccine," she said.

Influenza is the leading cause of [vaccine](#) preventable hospitalisations for Australian children aged under five years. Children experience considerable disease burden with a higher annual incidence than adults. Between 10% and 40% of children are infected each year. This increases considerably in [children](#) attending day-care.

The WHO and national immunisation technical advisory groups have endorsed 'business as usual' with regards to immunisation delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

More information: Jane Tuckerman et al.

Disparities in parental awareness of children's seasonal influenza vaccination recommendations and influencers of vaccination, *PLOS ONE* (2020).
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