

Fact Sheet

Pneumococcal disease, immunisation and your family

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What is pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease refers to a number of different types of infection due to the bacteria *Pneumococcus* (also called *Streptococcus pneumoniae*).

In children less than 5 years of age, *Pneumococcus* is the most common bacterial cause of:

- **otitis media** (middle ear infection)
- **pneumonia** (lung infection)
- **bacteraemia** (infection of the blood stream)
- **meningitis** (a life threatening infection of the lining of the brain).

The symptoms of pneumococcal disease are not specific and depend on the site of infection.

Who is at greatest risk of pneumococcal disease?

- All children under 2 years of age.
- Children over 2 years of age with the following risk factors. These children may require catch up vaccinations:
 - children who are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent
 - Down's syndrome, I
 - insulin dependant diabetes
 - chronic lung disease (including cystic fibrosis)
 - heart disease (cyanotic heart disease or heart failure)
 - kidney failure or persistent nephrotic syndrome
 - absent spleen or a spleen which does not work well (including sickle cell disease)

- weakened immune systems from disease or immune suppressive medications
- born prematurely (less than 28 weeks gestation or with chronic lung complications)
- Intracranial shunts
- cochlear implants
- leaks of CSF from trauma or surgery.

How do people get pneumococcal disease?

The *Pneumococcus* bacteria usually lives harmlessly in the nose and throat of healthy people, especially young children (up to 1 in 4 children in winter). In a small number of people (particularly those at increased risk – see above) the *Pneumococcus* bacteria invades the body or blood stream causing pneumococcal disease. Pneumococcal disease occurs most commonly in the colder winter months in Australia. Young children can pass the bacteria on to the elderly or those with specific risk factors.

Is pneumococcal disease preventable?

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) now recommend a specific 7-valent conjugate pneumococcal vaccine (7-valent conjugate pneumococcal vaccine) for all children less than 2 years of age and some older children with specific risk factors for pneumococcal infection.

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This vaccine covers 7 of the most common strains of the Pneumococcus bacteria that infect children. This vaccine for children is different from the vaccine used in adults.

This vaccine has a number of benefits including:

- reducing your child's chances of getting pneumococcal bacteraemia, meningitis, pneumonia and middle ear infections
- reducing the chance your child will need grommets by about 20%
- may even prevent your child from spreading the Pneumococcus bacteria to "at risk" adults such as grandparents or at risk children.

Facts about the 7 valent conjugate pneumococcal vaccine for children

- Babies less than 7 months of age should receive a total of 3 injections of the vaccine (at 2, 4 and 6 months of age along with their routine childhood vaccines).
- Older children that have not yet been immunised with the vaccine may require less doses as their immune system is more mature (your local doctor can refer to the 8th edition NHMRC Immunisation Handbook for guidance on the

exact number of doses required for your child).

- This pneumococcal vaccine is a very safe vaccine. Approximately 1 in 10 children may develop local redness and tenderness at the injection site or a mild fever. As with all vaccines or medications, a serious allergic reaction is possible but this occurs very rarely.
- The benefits of the vaccine greatly outweigh the risk of side effects of the vaccine.
- For more information about the vaccine and potential side effects visit the Immunise Australia website at <http://immunise.health.gov.au> and discuss with your family doctor or immunisation provider.

Remember

- The symptoms of pneumococcal disease are not specific.
- Children under 2 years have a greater risk of Pneumococcal disease.
- A vaccine is available; discuss this with your family doctor.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for your child.

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