

THE HON NICOLA ROXON MP

MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGEING

MEDIA RELEASE

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\$44 MILLION TO PROTECT THOSE MOST AT RISK FROM SEASONAL FLU

The Rudd Government has moved to nearly double its seasonal flu protection by extending its free vaccine program for vulnerable groups from next year. The Government will spend \$44 million over four years to cover an additional 2.2 million Australians – including all pregnant women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 to 50 years and people medically at risk aged six months to 64 years (such as those suffering chronic diseases including diabetes, cystic fibrosis or cardiac disease).

Extending the existing program which focuses on older Australians, means these new groups will be eligible for free vaccinations under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) from 1 January 2010.

GPs will be able to provide the influenza vaccine directly – meaning that individuals avoid any administrative costs as a result accessing the vaccine from a pharmacy, and only one visit to a GP will be needed. The aim is to increase coverage amongst vulnerable groups.

The likely benefits of this preventative health measure include:

- increased protection for the public at large via limited spread of the virus;
- reduced morbidity, treatments, hospitalisations and reduced work absenteeism; and
- better access to the vaccine for those at risk of influenza complications.

Flu vaccinations are the single most effective action in helping fight the spread of influenza in the community.

The vaccine will have particular benefits for Australia's Indigenous population as their increased incidence of chronic disease makes them particularly susceptible to severe effects of seasonal flu.

The current H1N1 pandemic influenza strain - which has been commonly referred to as swine flu - (for which a vaccine is not yet available) has clearly reminded us that any influenza virus can have a severe impact on vulnerable people and demonstrates the importance of maximising protection for particular groups in the community.

Human trials for a vaccine for the H1N1 pandemic influenza will begin next week, with results expected in September. The Government has already placed an order for 21 million doses of that vaccine. Pending TGA approval of the vaccine, the pandemic flu vaccine will be distributed on the basis of medical advice, with priority expected to be given to frontline health workers and those most at risk from severe effects of the virus.

For all media inquiries, please contact the Minister's Office on 0409 945 476

FACT SHEET

What is the measure?

Extending free seasonal flu vaccinations under the National Immunisation Program

Cost?

\$44.089 million over four years.

Who will be covered?

2.2 million additional Australians:

- Pregnant women
- All Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15-64
- Non-Indigenous Australians aged 6 months to 64 years who are at risk of severe outcomes from seasonal influenza, such as those with chronic conditions (including cardiac disease, cystic fibrosis, diabetes and renal failure).

Who already receives free vaccinations?

- 2.5 million are vaccinated under the NIP annually.
- Those eligible include:
- All people aged 65 and over
- All Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders over 50
- Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15-64 who are medically at risk of complications from seasonal influenza.

The current free vaccination program results in 72% of those over 65 being vaccinated.

Others access seasonal flu vaccinations via the PBS co-payment system or on private prescription.

When will the extended coverage being?

From 1 January 2010

Why?

- Seasonal flu has numerous social and economic costs, including costs from absenteeism, additional doctor's visits and medical treatment, and increased hospitalisations and mortality, especially among the elderly.
- It is estimated that seasonal flu causes around 2,000 deaths and 10,000 hospitalisations each year.
- Vaccination is the single most important measure available in reducing the impact of the flu.
- A more widespread vaccination program will increase the 'herd' coverage and provide benefits for all.
- Vaccinations are an important investment in preventative health.