

Doctors urging at-risk adults to vaccinate against “killer lung infection”

One-in-10 Australians aged over 65 years who are hospitalised with pneumonia die from the “killer lung infection”.^{1,2}

This is according to an article just published in *MJA Insight*¹ which is driving Lung Foundation Australia’s urgent plea for all at-risk adults to vaccinate against pneumococcal pneumonia this Pneumonia Awareness Week (May 28 – June 2, 2019).

According to article author, renowned Infectious Diseases Paediatrician and Immunisation Coalition Chairperson, Professor Robert Booy, Sydney, most people carry the pneumococcal pneumonia-causing bacteria in their throat, which can be complicated by pneumonia due to a weakened immune system or viral infection.^{1,3}

“All it takes is a simple lung or flu infection, particularly in those at-risk (people aged over 65 and those with medical and lifestyle risk factors), to wake the ‘sleeping dragon’ and develop into a life-threatening case of pneumonia.¹

“We are experiencing a big flu season, with more than 44,200 already confirmed cases of the virus this year,⁴” said Prof Booy.

“Flu often develops into pneumonia.⁵ Although older Australians are increasingly having an annual flu shot, only one-in-two are vaccinating against pneumococcal pneumonia,⁶ leaving them vulnerable to the killer lung infection.”

Pneumonia is contracted by inhaling infected droplets from someone who has coughed or sneezed into the air.³ The infection results in more than 77,000 hospitalisations⁷ and 4,000 deaths⁸ in Australia each year.

GPs offer free pneumococcal vaccines to those at highest risk of the infection, including over 65s, infants, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those with impaired immunity, chronic tobacco smokers and people with chronic medical illnesses, such as heart, lung, kidney and liver disease, and diabetes.^{9,10}

Estimates suggest more than 10 million Australians will have their annual flu shot in the coming months.¹

“Flu and pneumococcal pneumonia vaccinations can be given together, to offer at-risk adults the best protection against infection,” said Dr Satbir Aulakh, General Practitioner and Director, Ageless Health Clinics, Darwin.

“Pneumococcal pneumonia is caused by the bacterium, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. The adult pneumococcal vaccination protects against the 23 variations of this bacteria responsible for 85 per cent of adult pneumococcal infections in Australia.¹¹

“The lung infection can hit anyone, at any time. So when you next visit your GP, ask your doctor whether you qualify for a free pneumococcal vaccination,” Dr Aulakh said.

Retired bookkeeper and regular gym goer, Glenys, 66, Sydney, has long held a genuine zest for life and a love of adventure. But when she was struck down by pneumonia during a holiday to New Zealand, Glenys was left feeling depleted, lethargic and unproductive for weeks on end.

Glenys was hospitalised for three days, and spent a month mounting a recovery from pneumonia. She has since been diagnosed with the irreversible lung condition, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), which places her at heightened risk of contracting pneumococcal pneumonia. Glenys has therefore been vaccinated against pneumococcal pneumonia to prevent re-infection.

"When I contracted pneumonia at the end of the financial year, it was an extremely busy time for my bookkeeping business.

"I felt extremely drained for at least a month after leaving hospital. I had absolutely no energy. I wasn't supposed to work or do household chores," said Glenys.

This Pneumonia Awareness Week, Glenys is urging Australians at risk of pneumonia, to vaccinate against the preventable-infection because "vaccination is your best defence against pneumococcal pneumonia."

Lung Foundation Australia CEO, Mark Brooke, said this year *Pneumonia Awareness Week* aims to ignite conversation about the dangers of pneumonia for those at particular risk, including Australians over the age of 65 and those living with chronic illness and immunocompromising conditions.

"Pneumonia is a leading cause of hospitalisation in Australia and vaccination is your best defence against contracting pneumococcal pneumonia. It's also very important that people practice good hygiene, so washing their hands, maintaining clean surfaces, and avoiding others, including staying away from workplaces, if they feel symptomatic. All of those things are incredibly important, but it is absolutely critical to remember that pneumococcal pneumonia is vaccine preventable.

"Pneumonia symptoms include fever, cough or difficulty breathing¹² and they often come on quite rapidly or may develop over one to three days. If you notice any of these symptoms, it is important that you see your doctor straight away," Mr Brooke said.

The pneumococcal vaccine is provided free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) Schedule for all Australians aged 65 and above, Indigenous Australians aged 50 years and over, Indigenous Australians aged 15 to 49 years who are medically at risk, and infants under 12 months.¹⁰ A second dose of vaccine is also available to Australians with immunocompromising conditions or chronic disease, or smokers, a minimum of five years following their first dose.¹⁰

The vaccine is also available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), and the NIP in some States, for all adults aged 18 years or over, who are smokers or medically at risk, such as those with chronic lung, heart or liver disease or diabetes.^{10,13}

For more information about *Pneumonia Awareness Week*, call Lung Foundation Australia on 1800 654 301 or visit <https://knowplanact.lungfoundation.com.au>.

About pneumonia & pneumococcal pneumonia

Pneumonia is a broad term used to describe inflammatory lung infections that can be caused by bacteria, viruses or fungi.⁹ During normal respiration, air travels through the lungs to the alveoli or air sacs. Pneumonia results when air sacs in the lungs fill with secretions and fluids that obstruct normal air flow.⁹ Pneumonia symptoms include fever, cough and difficulty breathing and stiffness of the bones and joints.¹² One of the most severe and potentially life-threatening forms of pneumonia is pneumococcal pneumonia, which is caused by the bacterium, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, and is the only bacterial pneumonia for which vaccination is available.^{7,9}

About Lung Foundation Australia

Lung Foundation Australia is the only national charity dedicated to supporting anyone with a lung disease. Since 1990, Lung Foundation Australia has been the first point-of-call for patients, their families, carers, health professionals and the general community. Lung Foundation Australia works across all areas of lung disease. Our aim is to ensure lung health is a priority for all, from promoting lung health and early diagnosis, to supporting people with lung disease and championing equitable access to treatment and care.

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