

Practice Alert

Influenza Vaccine

Update: April 2023

Key points

- Influenza (the flu) is a contagious respiratory virus that is associated with fever, chills, joint and muscle pain, headache and fatigue.
- Vaccination is the most effective way to reduce the spread of influenza and reduce the incidence and severity of influenza-related hospitalisations and deaths.
- People with disability and especially those living in shared accommodation settings are at greater risk of experiencing serious complications such as hospitalisation associated with influenza.
- It is strongly recommended that both the Influenza and COVID-19 vaccines be received this year (2023).
- Influenza vaccines can be given on the same day with a COVID-19 vaccine for most people.

What is influenza?

Influenza is a common seasonal respiratory virus with transmission typically peaking during mid or late winter each year. The influenza virus spreads by human-to-human contact or through droplets spread by sneezing, coughing or talking. Transmission of influenza peaks during the winter months because people are indoors more with less ventilation, creating ideal conditions for viruses to spread.

Symptoms may include fever, cough, sore throat, aching muscles and joints, and runny nose. While most people will recover naturally within 7 to 10 days without any treatment, influenza can lead to other serious medical conditions such as pneumonia and even death in people who are most at risk.

People who are most at risk of serious complications associated with influenza include:

- People with disability such as people with an intellectual disability, spinal cord injury or seizure disorders
- People with chronic health conditions including diabetes, asthma, obesity, kidney or liver disorders
- People with compromised immune systems
- People with disability residing in shared accommodation

Is the influenza vaccine effective?

Vaccination is the most effective method to minimise the spread of disease and virus. The flu vaccine needs updating yearly to reflect changes in the influenza virus. Therefore, it is recommended that people receive the flu vaccination every year.

The flu vaccination reduces hospitalisation and serious flu-related illness in approximately 40-60% of the population after adjusting for age, sex, and co-occurring medical conditions and reduces the risk of transmission to those who are unable to be immunised such as the very young.

Influenza and COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Vaccines

COVID-19 is a different virus to influenza although both have some of the same symptoms such as fever, coughing or sore throat.

The influenza vaccination will not reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission and the COVID-19 vaccination will not reduce the risk of influenza.

It is strongly recommended that both vaccines be received this year.

Supporting participants

Providers should support participants to maintain their health and to access appropriate health services including vaccinations.

Providers should support participants in the following ways:

Informed consent

The influenza vaccination is voluntary for all Australians, including NDIS participants. Before receiving the vaccine, participants and/or their guardian or other decision-maker must give informed consent. Participants also has the right to refuse consent and withdraw consent previously given.

Providers can use the same processes to facilitate informed consent as they would for any other medical procedure. These processes should be in accordance with the relevant state or territory requirements for seeking consent for medical procedures. A participant's doctor and support network should encourage and support their decision-making about their health to gain informed consent.

Providers can help participants participate in informed decision-making process with their doctor by:

- Ensuring information is accessible using participant's preferred communication methods such as Easy Read.
- Using communication tools that best facilitates participation, such as visual prompts.
- Scheduling longer appointment times to discuss the benefits and risks of receiving the influenza vaccine.

Preparing for vaccination

- Talk with the participant about any concerns they may have about receiving the vaccine, such as anxiety or aversion to needles.
- Use accessible tools and resources, such as social stories, to explain the vaccination procedure and potential side effects.

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- Ask the participant who they would like to support them on the day of their vaccination.
 - Ensure any relevant support strategies are used, such as accompanying participants to appointments and communicating support plans to the doctor.
 - Seek advice from a participant's family member or guardian, their health practitioner, an NDIS behaviour support practitioner or disability support workers who are most familiar with the participant to manage participant anxiety or sensory issues.

Use of restrictive practices

Some NDIS participants are prescribed medication to take before medical appointments, including vaccinations, to help reduce anxiety or agitation. The use of medication prescribed by a medical practitioner for the treatment of, or to enable treatment of, a diagnosed mental disorder, a physical illness or physical condition is not considered a chemical restraint.

For this reason, the use of pre-appointment medication for a vaccine is unlikely to meet the definition of a regulated restrictive practice, and is not subject to any reporting requirements to the NDIS Commission. However, the participant must be provided the opportunity to give informed consent to the prescribed pre-appointment medication.

In contrast, the use of a physical or mechanical restraint to enable a participant to receive a vaccination is likely to constitute a restrictive practice.

If a restrictive practice is used to enable a participant to receive a medical procedure, including vaccines, providers must comply with the conditions of registration outlined in the [NDIS \(Restrictive Practices and Behaviour Support\) Rules 2018](#).

The [Fact Sheet: Behaviour support and restrictive practices](#) and [Regulated Restrictive Practices Guide](#) provides further information regarding NDIS Commission requirements.

Responsibilities of providers

Some NDIS providers have responsibility to assist participants in accessing their community and mainstream services, including visiting the doctor for the flu vaccination. This includes providers of supported independent living, support for daily living activities, or where the provider assists a participant to access mainstream supports in their community.

Providers with these responsibilities should:

- Be aware of the [population groups and chronic conditions](#) associated with increased risk of flu-related complications.
- Strongly encourage workers and NDIS participants to receive the annual flu vaccination.
- Consider ways to increase vaccination among workers, such as information and education programs or arranging workplace vaccinations.
- Implement and reinforce policies for good hygiene practices and infection control to reduce disease transmission.

Worker Capability

Providers should consider how to increase NDIS workers' training and skills in line with the [NDIS Workforce Capability Framework](#). Areas of training and development may include:

- Hygiene practices especially hand hygiene and respiratory and cough etiquette.
- Infection control and prevention procedures.

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- Understanding the flu, risks, symptoms and vaccination.
 - Ways to support participants who are reluctant to engage in vaccinations. This may include training in positive behaviour support or individual communication needs.

Provider Obligations

NDIS Code of Conduct

Providers and workers must comply with the [NDIS Code of Conduct](#) when providing supports or services to NDIS participants.

The NDIS Code of Conduct requires all NDIS providers and workers who deliver NDIS supports to NDIS participants to, among other things:

- Act with respect for individual rights to freedom of expression, self-determination and decision-making in accordance with applicable laws and conventions
- Provide supports and services in a safe and competent manner with care and skill
- Promptly take steps to raise and act on concerns about matters that might have an impact on the quality and safety of supports provided to people with disability.

NDIS Practice Standards

If you are a registered NDIS provider, you must comply with the [National Disability Insurance Scheme \(Provider Registration and Practice Standards\) Rules 2018](#) as part of your conditions of registration. The NDIS Practice Standards relate to the delivery of safe, quality supports and services, and the management of risks associated with the supports you provide to NDIS participants.

In delivering NDIS support and services, providers must also demonstrate compliance with the [National Disability Insurance Scheme \(Quality Indicators\) Guidelines 2018](#). The NDIS Commission's guidance on the [NDIS Practice Standards and Quality Indicators](#) provides a further resource to assist registered NDIS providers to understand their obligations.

The NDIS Practice Standards that are most relevant to this alert include:

- **Independence and informed choice:** each participant is supported by the provider to make informed choices, exercise control and maximise their independence relating to the supports provided.
- **Access to supports:** each participant accesses the most appropriate supports that meet their needs, goals and preferences.
- **Safe environment:** each participant accesses supports in a safe environment that is appropriate to their needs.
- **Risk management:** risks to participants, participants, workers and the provider are identified and managed.
- **Information management:** management of each participant's information ensures that it is identifiable, accurately recorded, current and confidential. Each participant's information is easily accessible to the participant and appropriately utilised by relevant workers.
- **Human resource management:** each participant's support needs are met by workers who are competent in relation to their role, hold relevant qualifications, and who have relevant expertise and experience to provide person-centred support.

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- **Support Planning:** each participant is actively involved in the development of their support plans. Support plans reflect participant needs, requirements, preferences, strengths and goals, and are regularly reviewed.

Resources

Information about the flu

- [Flu \(influenza\) - symptoms, treatment and prevention](#): Information from HealthDirect.
- [Cold or flu?](#): Information from HealthDirect.

Information about the flu vaccine

- [Flu vaccination in 2023](#): a fact sheet from the Australian Government Department of Health.
- [ATAGI advice on seasonal influenza vaccines in 2023](#): a fact sheet from the Australian Government Department of Health.
- [The flu jab, explained](#): a fact sheet from National Prescribing Service Medicine Wise.
- [Frequently asked questions about Influenza Vaccines](#): A fact sheet from the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance.
- NSW Health ['Save the date to vaccinate'](#): a fact sheet about the flu vaccination for kids.
- [Getting vaccinated against influenza](#): A resource from the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.

Resources for communicating about health

- [It's my Choice Toolkit! - Inclusion Melbourne](#): A suite of resources for people with disabilities and their supporters that help talk about the idea of choice.
- [Shared decision making: Tools and resources](#) that can help consumers and healthcare professionals.
- [Viruses and staying healthy | Council for Intellectual Disability](#): An Easy-Read about ways to prevent getting sick from a virus, such as good hygiene.
- [My Health Matters folder | Council for Intellectual Disability](#): A place to record information about health. The My Health Matters folder can be shared with health professionals to help communicate concerns about your health.

Other resources

- [Find a health service](#): An online search to find a health service near you.
- [Healthdirect Symptom Checker](#): Check your symptoms online to see whether you should get medical help.
- The [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) information webpage](#) on the NDIS Commission website contains links to updates, training, alerts and other resources.
- NDIS Commission resources and information about the COVID-19 vaccine rollout for [disability service providers](#) and [Information for people with disability about COVID-19 vaccines](#).

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General enquiries

Call: 1800 035 544 (free call from landlines). Our contact centre is open 9.00am to 4.30pm in the NT, 9.00am to 5.00pm in the ACT, NSW, QLD, SA, TAS and VIC Monday to Friday, excluding public holidays.

Email: contactcentre@ndiscommission.gov.au

Website: www.ndiscommission.gov.au