National Pneumococcal Vaccination Program for Older Australians

Why do I need vaccination against pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease comprises a range of infections and can be life-threatening. Pneumococcal disease does not just affect children. People over the age of 65 years and young children under the age of 2 are at higher risk of contracting pneumococcal disease than the rest of the population. Even healthy persons aged 65 or over are at greater risk of contracting the disease.

In 2003, there were 602 cases of serious pneumococcal disease, and 90 deaths, in Australians aged 65 years or over.

Indigenous Australians are also more at risk than non-Indigenous Australians. For this reason, free vaccine is also available through the National Indigenous Pneumococcal and Influenza Immunisation Program for all Indigenous people over the age of 50 and those aged 15 to 49 who have medical risk factors.

In adults, pneumococcal pneumonia is the most common form of serious (invasive) pneumococcal disease. It usually requires hospitalisation. Other forms of pneumococcal disease are infection around the brain (meningitis) and blood poisoning (septicaemia).

Pneumococcal disease can occur at any time of the year, although infections seem to be more common during winter and spring. Vaccination will help protect you against pneumococcal disease.

How can I protect myself?

The pneumococcal vaccine used in the Program is called PneumoVax®23. It provides protection against the 23 most common strains of pneumococcal bacteria responsible for most cases of disease in adults in Australia. Because there are a small number of strains that
aren’t covered by the vaccine, you should always seek medical help if you develop any of the signs and symptoms of pneumococcal disease, even if you have been vaccinated.

How often do I need to be vaccinated?

The recommended schedule for vaccinations in the 65 years or over age group is one dose on or near 65 years, then a single booster dose 5 years later.

If you have received a pneumococcal vaccination within the last 5 years, you should consult your general practitioner or other immunisation provider about whether you require revaccination at this time. Revaccination within three years is not recommended due to the increased risk of local reactions.

If I have previously had a pneumococcal infection do I still need to get vaccinated?

There are many different types of pneumococcal bacteria, and infection with one type doesn’t provide immunity against the other types. Therefore, it is recommended that you do receive the vaccination.

Where can I get the vaccine?

The vaccine can be administered by your usual immunisation provider, general practitioner or local health care centre. The vaccine is free if you are 65 years or over. You do not need to purchase the vaccine from a pharmacist.

Does the vaccine have any side effects?

The vaccine is very safe. Some recipients may experience mild side effects following pneumococcal vaccination such as some pain or swelling at the injection site and, occasionally, low-grade fever. Like any medicine, vaccines can cause severe allergic reactions, but the chances are extremely remote.

Where can I get more information?

Further information is available from your general practitioner or local health centre, the Immunisation Infoline on 1800 671 811 or the Immunise Australia Program website at http://immunise.health.gov.au/olderaus/pneumococcal.htm