



Managing Essential Immunisation Services in Primary Care during COVID-19

Advice for General Practices

Immunisation protects individuals and the community from vaccine-preventable disease.

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) provides [Guiding Principles for Maintaining Immunisation Services during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Some of these principles are outlined here:

- Immunisation remains an **essential service** during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Immunisation providers must maintain routine immunisation services and ensure on-time vaccination according to the current recommended schedules.
- Immunisation providers will need to adapt their procedures and practice to comply with measures in their local area, including physical distancing, to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

If scheduled vaccines are missed or delayed, or overall vaccination coverage rates are decreased, there is a risk of resurgence or outbreaks of some vaccine preventable diseases, either during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. Preventing this through vaccination is essential in reducing possible strain on the healthcare system.

Advice from the Public Health Unit at ACT Health

If patients/carers have not been identified as [close, casual or secondary contacts](#), and are not required to be in [quarantine](#) for any reason, [infant] vaccination should proceed as usual. It is an essential medical service, and there are repercussions for children in terms of access to childcare/schooling if they are not up to date with their immunisations, on top of the health risk of being unvaccinated.

There should still be a screening process, and symptomatic parents/carers and children should be directed to testing and immunisation re-scheduled until they are well.

Talking to patients about immunisation services during COVID-19

Attending your GP for essential immunisations such as childhood immunisations, your annual flu vaccine or other recommended vaccination is a necessary part of staying healthy during the pandemic. Your practice will have systems in place to ensure your safety. Advise your GP or nurse if you or your child are unwell prior to attending your appointment and they will advise on steps to be taken, including [COVID-19 testing](#) and when it is appropriate to reschedule your appointment.

If you are in quarantine or isolation, you **cannot** attend your appointment and must reschedule. You can find out more at [Quarantine requirements and advice](#).



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Practical Guidance for Vaccine Providers

To safely provide this essential service, consider the following guidelines:

- Plan COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures, including physical distancing, according to state and territory [guidelines](#). This means implementation of:
 - Policies and guidelines for [COVID-19 infection control](#) for the practice.
 - Additional processes – eg. Dedicated clinics, communications for scheduling appointments, separate staff administering vaccinations, longer appointments.
 - Screening processes to identify patients who may have COVID-19 – standard screening questions, procedures in place, use of pre-visit telephone screening. Standard precautions are sufficient for vaccinations of individuals who do not have any suggestive symptoms of COVID-19. Patients displaying symptoms should not present for vaccination.
 - Additional environmental measures such as dedicated areas or rooms for vaccinations, signage, clinic set up, including alternative locations eg. Outside (*if safe and appropriate*), alternate entry/exit from main waiting room.
- Maintain a safe post-vaccination period, in accordance with the guidelines of the [Australian Immunisation Handbook](#). However, in circumstances where adequate social distancing is not possible, refer to the ATAGI [clinical advice](#) regarding guidance and the criteria for shortened observation time post-vaccination.

If there are staff shortages, providers will need to implement their business continuity plans to determine if immunisation services can be safely undertaken.

If your service does not have the capacity to meet the needs of your patients, you should:

- Explore alternative models of delivery and/or suggest alternative immunisation providers to facilitate timely vaccination;
- Prioritise population groups whose recommended vaccination doses should not be missed or delayed, such as:
 - Newborns, infants and children aged <2 years who require vaccines under the [ACT National Immunisation Program](#) (NIP) schedule,
 - Pregnant women,
 - Individuals who have a [specified risk condition](#) that increases the risk of a vaccine preventable disease (may be recommended but not funded under the NIP),
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,
 - Older individuals (aged 65 years and older).
- Ensure webpages, telephone messages and signage are updated regularly to keep patients updated with expectations and changes that have been made to services. Consider the language needs of patients, including how to access interpreters and the availability of translated resources.

Keep up to date with [Chief Health Officer alerts](#).

See links provided in document for most recent updates.
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