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Free flu jab eligibility cut back this winter



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Māori and Pacific people aged between 55 and 64, and children up to 12 years are no longer eligible for free flu jabs, unless they have an underlying condition [Image credit: iStock]

There is disappointment fewer children and Māori and Pacific people will qualify for free flu vaccinations this winter.

Pharmac used COVID-19 response money to pay for free flu jabs for Māori and Pacific people aged between 55 and 64, and children up to 12 years old over the past two years, but that funding has ended so these groups will not be eligible this flu season.

People who are 65 and over, the immunocompromised, those with long-term conditions (like asthma, diabetes or cardiovascular disease), pregnant women, and people with addictions or specific mental health conditions will still be able to get a funded vaccination.

Children under four years of age who've been hospitalised for respiratory illness or have a history of significant respiratory illness will also be eligible for a free jab.

Parents will be disappointed

It will be a huge barrier

Northland pharmacist and Pharmaceutical Society board member Lanny Wong says there was definitely some uptake of the free flu vaccinations for the groups that were funded with the COVID-19 money.

Parents will be disappointed and surprised when they find out their children no longer qualify. "It is a shame now they can't get the whole family protected," says Ms Wong, who owns Mangawhai Pharmacy.

She says it's a huge cost for a family who chooses to vaccinate everyone.

There are more multigenerational households now too. "Getting rid of the free flu vaccination for children may impact those households where grandparents are looking after, living with or raising grandchildren," says Ms Wong.

Ms Wong says there's not a huge Māori and Pacific population in her area, but she can think of a handful of customers she will have to inform that their flu vaccinations won't be free this year.

She says that usually people of those ethnicities have higher health needs and are more disadvantaged than her other patients.

'A huge barrier'

South Auckland pharmacist Rav Lal only heard about the changes to flu vaccination eligibility from a closed Facebook group for pharmacists.

Mr Lal, who owns Airport Oaks Pharmacy in Māngere, says most people in his area are Māori and Pacific and in the 55-plus age group, so they do provide a large number of flu vaccinations for those groups.

“It will be a huge barrier,” says Mr Lal of the eligibility changes.

The pharmacy will add only a small margin to its flu vaccines so will charge \$25 to \$30 per vaccination. However, even at that price, with everything else being so expensive, getting a flu vaccine will fall down people’s priority list.

Mr Lal says he and his team will make an effort to look up patients’ records and contact those with underlying conditions to tell them they are funded for a flu vaccination. “They may not realise,” he says. The pharmacy has quite a lot of vaccinators, who can vaccinate people “on the spot”.

‘It was a good spend’

Te Aka Whai Ora chief medical officer Rawiri McKree-Jansen says the tightened restrictions on flu vaccine funding are surprising and a little disappointing.

Dr McKree-Jansen, a specialist GP, told *RNZ* host Corin Dann the free flu vaccines helped prevent many Māori and Pacific people being hospitalised, which was good for them and for the health system.

People of those ethnicities die sooner and are especially exposed to the flu because they're more likely to live in bigger households and have comorbidities, he adds.

Dr McKree-Jansen says it's a return to the old system where people in this age group with comorbidities had to go to their primary care physician to get funded flu jabs.

“But it's a couple of extra steps and it's really unlikely that our health system is going to do a fantastic job of doing that for Māori and Pacific.

“We've got a history of under-delivering.”

Mr McKree-Jansen says it was much better and simpler when Māori and Pacific over the age of 55 could get a free flu vaccine.

Free flu vaccines for children up to 12 was good too, he says, because they're also a more vulnerable population who we want to keep out of hospital. "It was a good spend."

Mr McKree says Pharmac will always be in a tight financial situation, trying to determine how to spend the money. However, he says we could see the benefits of opening up free flu jabs to more people.

"But I think we should be investing that sort of resource to support vulnerable populations."

He is keen to work with Pharmac to have the funding reintroduced.

Difficult decisions

Pharmac pharmaceuticals director Geraldine MacGibbon says the flu vaccine funding comes from the agency's combined pharmaceutical budget.

"We have to make **really difficult decisions** about what's funded from this fixed budget for New Zealanders," says Ms MacGibbon in a media release.

People can get a Pharmac-sourced flu vaccination from 2 April. The agency thinks around one million people will be eligible to get it for free.

Australian vaccine manufacturer CSL Seqirus has already released its private flu vaccine Flud Quad.

It's designed for over 65s and is adjuvanted, meaning it has a substance that boosts the immune system's response, and is expected to cost \$45 to \$65.

'People do need to get the jab'

Six people died of the flu at a Coromandel resthome in late January/early February after an outbreak of influenza A at Whitianga Care Centre and Village.

WHO National Influenza Centre director Sue Huang says what happened is “quite unusual but not unheard of” because there are very vulnerable people in resthomes.

Dr Huang says 34 people were reported to have the flu in the latest virology weekly report for the week ending 25 February, which is comparable to last year.

However, influenza A H3N2 is the predominant strain, rather than influenza A H1N1, which was the main one last year.

Often the most common strain of flu in summer continues into winter. However, “The flu is notoriously difficult to predict,” says Dr Huang, so it’s hard to know if H3N2 will continue to dominate this year.

There’s quite a lot of flu in the northern hemisphere with H1N1 dominating in some regions and H3N2 in others.

H3N2 tends to hit older people with an underlying condition more, and there are more hospitalisations or more mortality associated with it.

“The most important message is this year people do need to get the jab,” says Dr Huang.

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