FAQs for Pacific communities – Immunisation and vaccination (MMR and COVID-19)

Immunisation

Are there still bad diseases in New Zealand?

There are many diseases that can make our family very sick. Some of these can be prevented or the risk of getting a disease can be reduced by having a vaccine. Having a vaccine and getting immunised is a safe way of being protected against a disease - much safer than getting the disease itself.

Why get immunised?

If your child receives a vaccine (gets immunised), they become more protected against the disease that the vaccine protects against. Not all vaccines are given at a young age, so children can still get some diseases. If everyone is vaccinated/immunised, this will help reduce the chances of you and your family getting sick with a disease. This can also help protect young children in the family who are too young to be immunised. This is how immunisation helps protect us, our family and the community against the spread of serious diseases such as measles, flu, chickenpox, whooping cough or COVID-19.

How do vaccines work?

Vaccines can teach your body how to fight off the real disease if you come into contact with it. Immunisation gets your body's natural defence system ready to fight off germs/disease before you get sick.

When should you get immunised?

The National Immunisation Schedule is a series of free vaccinations given at different ages, starting from pregnancy. Immunising on time provides the best protection. Missing or delaying a vaccination can put your family's health at risk. Ask your local general practice, nurse, pharmacist or any health professional about when your child should get immunised.

How do you get immunised?

Your nurse or doctor can provide the vaccinations, which are generally given as injections in the arm or leg (except for the rotavirus vaccine which is given as drops of liquid into the mouth). Contact your family general practice to make an appointment. Pharmacists, midwives and other specially trained health professionals also offer some vaccines. Vaccines on the National Immunisation Schedule are

all free. Other vaccines are funded only for people at particular risk of that disease. You can also choose to pay for some vaccines that you are not eligible to receive for free.

MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine

About the measles vaccine

The measles vaccine is called MMR vaccine and protects you against three serious diseases: measles, mumps and rubella. In New Zealand, children are given their first dose at 12 months and their second dose at 15 months.

Does it work?

Yes, the MMR vaccine is very effective. After two doses, around 99 percent of people are protected. A small number of people who are fully vaccinated may still get sick. But they usually get a milder illness than people who haven't been immunised. MMR vaccines have been used in New Zealand since 1990 and has a great safety record.

What are some of the potential effects?

After getting the MMR vaccine, you may have a sore arm, raised temperature, or feel faint. That's why you'll be asked to stay for 20 minutes after you have the vaccine. If a severe allergic reaction does happen, the vaccinator can treat it fast.

One or two days after being immunised, some people might have a headache or generally feel a bit unwell, as if you have a cold. These effects show the vaccine is working and usually get better on their own.

The chances of having a serious side effect from the MMR vaccine is very rare; however, if you experience any symptoms such as persistent headaches, fever, a rash, or swollen glands after immunisation then please see your general practitioner.

Who shouldn't have the MMR vaccine?

The MMR vaccine should not be given to anyone who has major problems with their immune system. This includes people on treatment for cancer as the vaccine could make them very sick. If you are unsure about getting the vaccine for you, or anyone in your family, please ask your general practice or nurse. Also talk with them if you've had a serious reaction to a vaccine in the past, are being treated for cancer or another severe illness, or had a blood transfusion in the last year. You should not have the MMR vaccine when you're pregnant.

Who can have the MMR vaccine?

If you were born before 1969, you don't need to have the MMR vaccine. Because measles was so common back then, many people got it, and developed protection that almost lasts for life. But anyone born after 1969 should have had two doses of the MMR vaccine. Ask your doctor, parent or caregiver if you had two doses of MMR vaccine. If you don't know if you've been fully immunised against measles, it's best to get immunised. It's okay to have an extra dose of the MMR vaccine. Almost everyone can get immunised. There are very few people who can't be vaccinated.

Where do I go to get the MMR vaccine?

You can ask your general practice. You can also get a free immunisation at some pharmacies if you're 16 or older. Check if your local pharmacy offers the MMR vaccine. You don't need an appointment. The pharmacist will take you to a private space in the pharmacy to do this. A health professional may offer you a free immunisation when you're at a community event, or at school or work.

How much will it cost?

It's free.

Will I keep my family safe if I get the MMR vaccine?

Protect the people you care about. Get immunised to help stop the spread of measles. Being immunised means you won't catch measles and can't spread it to children too young to have the vaccine, or people who can't have it because of medical reasons. Not sure if you're immunised against measles? It's okay and safe to get immunised again.

COVID-19 vaccine

COVID-19 vaccines will play an important role in protecting yourselves, your family and your community. This is also important for those of you who want to reunite with your families overseas.

Will the COVID-19 vaccines be safe?

Vaccine safety is taken very seriously, and before any vaccine is used, it has to go through a series of very large tests (clinical trials) with thousands of people. These trials compare the vaccinated people with the unvaccinated people. This can show us if the vaccinated people have any problems different to the unvaccinated ones. Medsafe is New Zealand's the medicines regulator. They will check all the information from the clinical trials and the information from the millions already vaccinated overseas. No vaccine will be used in New Zealand until all this information has been thoroughly checked and approved by Medsafe. They need to be confident the vaccine is safe and effective to be used in our community.

How can the COVID-19 vaccine be safe? It's all happening so quickly.

Scientists around the world have been sharing their data which has made it faster to create the COVID-19 vaccines. In addition, the different phases of the clinical trials have proceeded faster than normal because there are so many people willing to participate in them, without compromising on running the trials well.

Medsafe has adapted their processes to speed up the assessment of the data without compromising on the quality of reviewing the data. Companies that make vaccines have built large manufacturing plants before the vaccines were approved by medicines regulators. They have been able to manufacture vaccines much faster and in bigger quantities than usual.

All these changes mean that things that used to take a long time and could only happen one after another, have been able to happen faster and be worked on at the same time, without taking any shortcuts or skipping any steps.

Will the COVID-19 vaccines work and be safe for Pacific people?

There is no evidence that ethnicity changes how people react to the vaccines but assessing and understanding any potential side effects is part of Medsafe's approval process. When you receive your vaccine, the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) will collect information on who you are and what vaccine you received, as part of this, the Ministry would like to collect information about your ethnicity so that we can all understand this better.

Will the vaccines stop the spread of COVID-19 in our community?

The data shows the vaccines are very good at protecting people from getting very sick from the virus, but it isn't clear yet how good the vaccines may be at reducing the virus being passed on to others. It could be that you can pass it on to other people after you are vaccinated. For that reason, we are encouraging everyone to get vaccinated as well as and to continue to use other public health measures such as washing hands, social distancing, contact tracing etc. Vaccines alone may not prevent transmission so a combination of approaches will help us stop the spread.

How effective will the COVID-19 vaccines be?

No vaccine will ever fully protect everyone who receives it. Some individuals do not respond to vaccines. However, for Medsafe to approve vaccines to be used in New Zealand, they must prove the vaccines are effective and safe. The information we have so far suggests that some are very good at reducing the effects of the virus. Vaccines don't replace the need for good health and hygiene practices or staying home if you are unwell, washing hands regularly, using face masks and coughing or sneezing into your elbow.

When will the COVID-19 vaccines be available for my family/ community?

The vaccine supply will probably be quite small to start with and build over the next year or so. Vaccines will be given out in a sequence to different groups of people, depending on their risk of getting COVID-19 and how sick it might make them. For example, quarantine facility staff, port workers and medical staff will get the vaccine first, as they are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19. This can help protect those who aren't vaccinated out in the wider community. It does mean that some groups will have to wait a bit longer before getting the vaccine, but New Zealand will provide COVID-19 vaccines free to everyone.

Does getting the vaccine protect those I live with?

Almost all vaccines also protect people around you by reducing the spread of the disease. However, we do not know yet if COVID-19 vaccines will be able to do this. Therefore, we recommend everyone who can, gets vaccinated to ensure they are protected and hopefully to reduce spread to others.

What if I have a bad reaction to the vaccine?

At the time of vaccination, you will be given clear information on any likely reactions and these will be monitored closely. If you do notice any unexpected reactions or have any concerns at all after having the vaccine, please report these to your health provider or general practice.

Is it safe to have the MMR vaccine and COVID-19 vaccine at the same time?

Medsafe recommend a gap of at least four weeks between the COVID-19 and MMR vaccines, so that we can track any side effects and understand which vaccine they might relate to. As we learn more about COVID-19 vaccines this advice might change in the future.

What's the difference between the COVID-19 and MMR vaccines?

Each disease is caused by a different virus, so the vaccines target the relevant virus. MMR vaccine uses live viruses that have been weakened so they can't spread and cause serious illness. The current COVID-19 vaccines do not use live viruses.

Other information

I have a fear of needles

Being scared of needles is common. Nurses, doctors and others who administer vaccines are excellent at helping manage all sorts of worries and concerns. Let them know you're worried, and they'll be able to make it as easy as possible.

I have questions about immunisation and vaccines. Who can answer them?

Your general practice, pharmacy, Healthline, Pacific health navigators, nurses and any health trained professionals. There is also information online. It can be found at:

https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/immunisation/protect-against-measles
https://www.healthed.govt.nz/health-topic/immunisation-and-vaccinations
We have also recruited the help of immunisation/vaccination champions who are qualified clinicians and health experts who will help spread the word. Look out for them on social media, radio, and community forums near you.