

# Febrile convulsions in children and the influenza vaccine

for parents and caregivers...

## Flu vaccines

There has been a lot of publicity about Australia's decision to suspend the seasonal influenza immunisation programme for children under five. This action was taken because it appeared more children than usual might be having febrile convulsions – caused by the fever produced as a response to the vaccine. It is very difficult to say if there really have been more cases of febrile convulsions than usual.

In New Zealand the Ministry of Health has recommended not to use one vaccine, Fluvax<sup>®</sup>, for children under five: this was the vaccine used in most cases of febrile convulsions in Western Australia. There are two other vaccines available that can be used for children under five: Vaxigrip<sup>®</sup> and Influvac<sup>®</sup>.

## Reporting adverse events

Adverse events following immunisation (AEFI) refer to any health concern people might experience after being immunised. Anyone can report AEFIs to the Centre for Adverse Reaction Monitoring (CARM), at the University of Otago. AEFIs are reported without proving why an event happened, and can be reported anytime after an immunisation, even months after. The important work happens after the reporting, this is when medical experts look at all the events and work out if something unexpected is going on, and if that could be related to the use of a particular vaccine or drug.

## Febrile convulsions

Febrile convulsions (fits) can occur in children when they have a spiking fever. They normally occur in children aged between six months and five years, with most cases happening between six months and three years. They can be very frightening to see, but in healthy children they don't last long or cause any long term concerns. It is worth remembering that although not a common condition, febrile convulsions are not particularly rare either. It is estimated that 2-4% of all children will have a least one febrile convulsion in their life time.

## Flu and fever

We know that all flu vaccines can cause a fever, particularly in younger children under three years. Because of this, febrile convulsions are a known but rare event after flu vaccination. It is important to know that the flu itself also causes a high fever, and you are more likely to get a high fever from getting the flu than getting the flu vaccine.

When deciding whether to give your child a flu vaccine, you need to think about how likely it is they will get the flu, and how serious the flu could be for them. Some children are more likely to have serious complications when they get the flu. These include children with medical problems like asthma, other chest problems or neurological conditions like cerebral palsy.

## More adverse events than usual?

It is very possible that in the next few weeks more adverse events than usual will be reported after the flu vaccine. Everyone will be worried that they should report any temperature or adverse event, just in case. This won't necessarily mean that more children than usual are experiencing fevers after immunisation, just that we are being extra careful. CARM and the Ministry of Health will be carefully monitoring all reported events to decide if anything needs to be done.

## Tips following immunisation

Some of the common reactions reported after immunisation are fever, tenderness, swelling and redness at the site of the injection. Here are some ways to make your baby or child more comfortable after their immunisation:

### TLC (Tender loving care)

Give your child lots of cuddles and lots of fluids. If you are breastfeeding, give lots of feeds.

### Temperature

If your child gets hot, undressing them down to a single layer, for example a singlet and pants, can help. Make sure the room is not too hot or too cold.

### Medication for temperature or pain

If your child is unsettled, miserable because of the fever or seems to be in pain, you might consider giving them paracetamol or ibuprofen to make them feel more comfortable. You must follow the dosage instructions on the bottle. It is dangerous to give more than the recommended dose. Routinely giving babies and children paracetamol before and repeatedly after immunisation just in case they feel unwell is not recommended. There is some evidence that paracetamol may reduce the effectiveness of childhood vaccinations.

### Pain at the injection site

An ice pack wrapped well in a dry cloth, or better still a cool cloth, can be held over the injection site if it is sore.

If you are concerned about your child, contact your family doctor or nurse.

You can also call Healthline (free) on 0800 611 116.

## Can I prevent my child having a febrile convulsion?

There is no easy way to prevent a febrile convulsion. Keep your child cool and comfortable when they have a fever. The best ways to bring your child's temperature down are by undressing them so that they are wearing a single layer (for example a singlet and pants) and making sure the room is not too hot or too cold. If your child is having a convulsion:

- Don't put anything in your child's mouth
- Don't put your child into a bath or shower to cool down

## More information

For more information on the flu vaccine and the influenza disease:

- call 0800 IMMUNE (466 863).
- Check out: [www.influenza.org.nz](http://www.influenza.org.nz) or [www.immune.org.nz](http://www.immune.org.nz)
- Kidshealth ([www.kidshealth.org.nz/](http://www.kidshealth.org.nz/)) also have more information on febrile convulsions.

Vaccines are prescription medicines. Talk to your doctor, midwife or nurse about the benefits or possible risks. TAPS No. 4137 March 2010