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HEALTH EXPERTS URGE GPs AND HEALTH PRACTITIONERS TO ENCOURAGE VICTORIANS TO STAY UP TO DATE WITH THEIR VACCINATIONS

Clinicians at three of Melbourne's premier hospitals are urging health practitioners to encourage Victorians to stay up to date with their COVID-19 and flu vaccinations.

They are particularly keen for GPs to encourage groups where vaccination rates are identified to be low: older people over 65 years of age, people with cancer, and children, particularly those at higher risk of vaccine-preventable diseases.

The clinicians, from Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, the Royal Melbourne Hospital and the Royal Children's Hospital, are appealing to GPs to encourage their patients to get vaccinated, as it is a key way to prevent infection, reduce unnecessary hospitalisations and presentations at emergency departments and decrease risk of severe illness.

Associate Professor Benjamin Teh, an infectious diseases physician and clinical research fellow at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, said patients with cancer, particularly those with immune suppression, were at higher risk for COVID-19 and influenza virus infection.

"Combine this with older age, and it's a significant risk for severe infection and poor outcomes," he said.

Associate Professor Teh said health practitioners should encourage patients with cancer to stay up to date with their COVID-19 and annual seasonal influenza vaccinations, stressing that these were safe for cancer patients to get at the same time.

"It's an effective strategy to reduce the risk and burden of infection," he added.

"The vaccines are safe for patients with cancer, including those receiving active cancer treatment, as they don't contain live viruses," he said.

Head of the Immunisation Service at the Royal Children's Hospital, Professor Nigel Crawford, said RCH is also recommending that health practitioners actively encourage young patients plus their carers not to put off getting vaccinated.

"We know that one of the strongest drivers for children to be vaccinated is a recommendation from their treating team," he said.

Professor Crawford said RCH recommends all children be immunised against influenza, and this is particularly important for children aged 6 months to 5 years and children of any age with immunosuppression. Children with medical conditions such as those who have received a transplant, those undergoing treatment for cancer and those without a functioning spleen may also require additional vaccines and possibly additional doses.

"Special risk patients can have a suboptimal response to routine vaccine schedules, leading to more doses being necessary to achieve adequate protection."

COVID-19 vaccination can also be important for children aged 6 months and older who have severe immunocompromise or have an increased risk of severe disease.

Professor Crawford said families should ask their trusted healthcare professionals about the optimal timing of vaccinations for their child, especially if they are on immunosuppressive



therapy. Delay could put children at risk of serious infection, he warned, which could be more severe if the child has an underlying medical condition.

The Royal Melbourne Hospital's Deputy Director Medical Services, Associate Professor Irani Thevarajan, said elderly patients, especially those with underlying significant comorbidities, chronic inflammatory conditions, and immunocompromising conditions, were also at higher risk of morbidity and mortality associated with COVID-19 and influenza.

"Depending on their age and risk factors, your patient could be eligible for one or two booster doses in the last 12 months for COVID and an annual dose for influenza," she said.

"Being up to date with COVID-19 and influenza vaccinations will protect your patient against serious illness or death."

For more detail about this advice, [visit our information page](#) on the Melbourne Vaccine Education Centre website. For the latest vaccination advice from ATAGI, visit [the Australian Government website](#).

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