

16 March 2020

All vaccine providers

Dear colleagues,

Influenza immunisation – timing and priorities 2020

The Ministry of Health is preparing for the potential impact of COVID-19 on the health sector. As part of this preparation, this year's influenza immunisation programme will be starting early for eligible patients only, as they are at greatest risk of serious illness from influenza. Healthcare workers are also able to be vaccinated early. Funded vaccination can begin, and claims will be accepted from 18 March 2020. Vaccines are available to order and details of how to place an order are available at [influenza.org.nz](https://www.influenza.org.nz). Influenza vaccines for children aged 6 months to 3 years will be available from 1 April 2020.

Eligible patients include people aged 65 and over, pregnant women, people with certain chronic conditions and young children with a history of severe respiratory illness. For full details of eligibility criteria, see <https://www.influenza.org.nz/eligibility-criteria>. Healthcare workers are also prioritised for immunisation. Pharmacist vaccinators will be able to administer and claim for funded vaccination for eligible people aged 13 and over.

Influenza vaccine does not protect against COVID-19, however it will help prevent a serious illness that causes hundreds of deaths and places significant pressure on healthcare services each winter in New Zealand. Improving protection against influenza for our healthcare workforce and for our most vulnerable populations will improve our ability to manage increased demand as a result of COVID-19.

We ask that general practices, pharmacies and occupational health providers defer privately funded vaccination until Monday 13 April, two weeks after the usual start date, to allow eligible patients and healthcare workers to have priority access. Please do not book ineligible patients until then.

We anticipate an increase in demand for influenza vaccination in light of COVID-19, and as a result more than 400,000 extra influenza vaccines will be supplied to New Zealand over the amount that was used in 2019. However, we consider this prioritisation to be an important way to ensure our available resources are used to maximise their benefit to our population as a whole.

Yours sincerely

Dr Ashley Bloomfield

Director-General of Health