

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®, for children under five: this vaccine appears to have more reports of side effects in New Zealand and Australia, although investigations are still ongoing. There are two other vaccines available that can be used for children under five in New Zealand: Vaxigrip® and Influvac®.

What happens during a febrile convulsion?

Febrile convulsions (fits) can occur in young children when they have a spiking fever. It is estimated that 3-5% of all children will have a least one febrile convulsion between the ages of 6 months and 5 years, most commonly around 18 months.

- Your child becomes unresponsive.
- They may become stiff or their arms and legs may start to twitch or jerk.
- Their eyes may roll back.
- Sometimes they are floppy.
- It usually lasts a minute or two and stops by itself. (At the time, it will seem to last much longer).

After the jerking or stiffness stops, your child will usually sleep for a while (up to an hour). Some children appear to be very upset, and then become sleepy. Seeing a febrile convulsion can be very frightening, especially if it is the first time that you see one. In healthy children they don't last long or cause any long term concerns.

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 adverse 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. 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. The Ministry of Health particularly recommends the importance of offering flu vaccination to these children.

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, 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. It is very possible that 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 immunisations

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:

- Give your child lots of cuddles and lots of fluids.
- If you are breastfeeding, give lots of feeds.
- 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 your child gets hot, undress them down to a single layer, (e.g. singlet and underpants).
- Make sure the room is not too hot or too cold.

Medication for temperature or pain

If your child is unsettled and miserable because of the fever or seems to be in pain, you might consider giving them paracetamol (e.g. Pamol) 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.

Giving babies and children paracetamol before immunisation just in case they feel unwell or feverish is NOT recommended.

What to do if my child has a febrile convulsion?

Most febrile convulsions stop by themselves. They do not need any treatment. The most important thing to do is to keep your child safe while they are having a convulsion:

- Lie your child down on their side, in the recovery position.
- Do not put anything in their mouth.
- Do not put your child in the bath or shower to cool them down.
- Loosen their clothes around their face and neck.
- Wait a few minutes for the convulsion to stop.
- Check the time if you can to see how long the convulsion goes for.
- It is important to find out what caused the convulsion: contact your family doctor or seek further medical advice as soon as possible.

Dial 111 and ask for an ambulance if:

- The convulsion does not stop after a few minutes.
- Your child is having trouble breathing.
- Your child looks very unwell.
- Your child is not waking up and responding after the convulsion.

More information

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

- call 0800 IMMUNE (466 863).
- Check out: www.influenza.org.nz or www.immune.org.nz
- Kidshealth (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. NA 4137 April 2010