

Immunisation

Information sheet - developed April 2016, updated July 2018



For case workers supporting people from refugee backgrounds

This information sheet was developed to inform case workers in Victoria about recent immunisation policy changes that impact on families from refugee backgrounds.

Key background

Catch-up immunisation is an essential part of the post arrival health check, and evidence suggests all people who arrive as a refugee or asylum seeker will need catch-up vaccines. Catch-up immunisation generally requires 3 visits over at least 4 months (4 visits over 10 months for those aged 4-9 years) with several vaccines each visit. In Victoria, children can access immunisation at their general practice (GP) or at local government services (LGA), and sometimes through LGA English language school outreach programs. All refugees and asylum seekers, regardless of age, are eligible for free age appropriate catch up vaccines.

When people receive vaccinations, the vaccine provider records them on the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR). If there is a written record of vaccines given overseas these can also be recorded on AIR (which reduces the number of vaccines/catch-up visits). Before 2016, the (then) Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR) only recorded information for children <7 years of age. In late 2016 - ACIR extended to become the AIR - a 'whole-of life' register.

New arrivals from Syria and Iraq will have had their first set of catch-up vaccines before they arrive in Australia, these will need to be recorded on AIR as part of the first health visit.

Australian and Victorian government immunisation policy changes

Recent immunisation legislation and policy changes require children to be fully up-to-date with their childhood vaccinations OR be on a vaccine catch-up schedule OR have a medical reason for not being fully vaccinated:

- to be eligible for certain family assistance payments from Centrelink (the Child Care Supplement and the full Family Tax Benefit Part A payment – families' fortnightly Family Tax Benefit Part A payments will now have a reduction of \$28 for each unvaccinated child) – **No Jab No Pay** – Australian legislation. Centrelink uses the AIR record to determine immunisation status.
- in order to enrol in childcare or kindergarten (the law does not apply to enrolment in primary or secondary school, outside school hours care services, or playgroups) – **No Jab No Play** – Victorian legislation. Families need to provide a copy of their child's AIR record.

Impact on people from refugee backgrounds

Families from refugee backgrounds may need support around immunisation in some of the following scenarios:

Scenario 1: Enrolling a newly arrived child from a refugee background in childcare or kindergarten

Problem: No children from refugee backgrounds arrive in Australia fully immunised due to differences between Australian and country of origin immunisation schedules, therefore new arrivals will not be 'up-to-date' when they enrol in childcare or kindergarten. The Victorian legislation requires children to be up to date OR on a catch-up plan for enrolment to be approved. The Australian legislation requires children to be up to date OR on a catch-up plan (as registered on AIR) OR have a medical exemption to receive certain family assistance payments, which help support childcare costs.

Solution: Under Victorian policy, children who arrived in Australia as a refugee or asylum seeker are eligible for a 16-week grace period, which allows them to enrol in childcare or kindergarten (regardless of their immunisation status) while they get their vaccinations on track. The family will need to attend a GP or LGA immunisation service for vaccinations and take any records of previous vaccinations to the appointment with them, including offshore health records. When vaccines are registered on AIR they will be recorded as being on a catch-up plan for Centrelink purposes.

An Immunisation History Statement from the AIR is the only form of documentation accepted for the purposes of confirming enrolment for a child in an early childhood education and care service. Immunisation providers can now

download and print a client's Immunisation History Statement directly from the client's AIR record. Alternatively, families can obtain their child's AIR record online through their [myGov account](#) or by using the [Express plus Medicare mobile app](#); or by calling the AIR enquiries line on 1800 653 809 and requesting a statement be posted to them in the mail (this can take up to 28 days). If the family does not have a myGov account, they can create one and link it to their Centrelink online account. If there are any concerns with enrolment (or if this is declined) contact the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services Immunisation Section on 1300 882 008.

Scenario 2: Enrolling a child from a refugee or asylum seeker background in childcare or kindergarten where their immunisation status is unclear or not up to date.

Problem: Some children remain under-immunised in Australia due to difficulties accessing immunisation services, and/or their AIR record does not reflect their immunisations, and does not record them as being up to date. In this scenario, both the Victorian and Australian laws will affect the family as above.

Solution: These children need an assessment of their immunisation status to: clarify their immunisation history, enter information into AIR if it has not been recorded, and provide catch-up vaccines if needed. This can occur at either a GP or LGA immunisation service. They are still eligible for the grace period, and will need to provide the same documentation as above. If there are any concerns with enrolment (or if this is declined) contact the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services Immunisation Section on 1300 882 008.

Scenario 3: Family have received letters from Centrelink about Family Assistance payments stating the children are un- or under-immunised for their age

Problem: Children in the family are not recorded as being fully immunised on AIR and the family has received letters from Centrelink advising them that they are no longer meet the immunisation requirements for the Child Care Supplement and/or the full Family Tax Benefit Part A payment.

This can occur because 1) they have not had some/all of their vaccines and need catch-up immunisation, or 2) they have had some/all of their catch-up vaccines, but vaccines may not be recorded on AIR (due to systems issues, or because the child was aged >7 years on arrival or received catch-up vaccines after age 7 years before 2016).

Because the Family Tax Benefit Part A extends to 20 years, this situation may occur for families with older children, including some who had vaccines many years previously.

Solution: These children need an assessment of their immunisation status to: clarify their immunisation history, enter information into AIR if it has not been recorded, and provide catch-up vaccines if needed. This can occur at either their GP or LGA immunisation service. The only way for a family's payments to be reinstated is to ensure any previous vaccines are registered on AIR and/or for child to commence and go on to complete a recognised catch-up schedule. The family should take any records of previous vaccinations given in Australia or overseas to the appointment with them. When vaccines are registered on AIR they will be recorded as being on a catch-up plan for Centrelink purposes. The family may need to attend multiple visits to complete the full catch-up program. They will need to attend all of the visits, or they will lose payments again if the next set of catch-up vaccines become overdue.

The family will not need to pay to have their child vaccinated as catch-up vaccinations are now funded for all children and young people <20 years, and for refugees and humanitarian entrants 20 years and older (from [July 2017](#)).

Scenario 4: No link between Centrelink and AIR records

Problem: Centrelink does not link to Medicare and cannot determine vaccinations recorded on AIR, and the family has received letters from Centrelink asking them to confirm their child's Medicare number and child reference number.

Solution: Check the letter from Centrelink. In some cases the only requirement might be confirming the child's Medicare number and reference number – in which case you may be able to support the family to do this. The family can do this by logging in to their [myGov account](#) and selecting Centrelink online account\My Profile\immunisation. Alternatively, they can call the Immunisation Register on 1800 653 809.

Medical exemptions

Under the current requirements, only General Practitioners can notify medical exemptions. Some children may not have received vaccinations because of medical conditions, or because they are known to be immune to certain diseases. In this situation, the child should be referred to their GP, who will need to complete and submit an AIR [Medical Exemption form](#).

Further reading

Further reading can be found here: <http://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/learn/immunisation/>

Specific topics include:

- No Jab No Play (Victorian government policy): <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/immunisation/vaccination-children/no-jab-no-play/frequently-asked-questions>
- No Jab No Pay (Australian government policy): <http://www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/fact-sheet-no-jab-no-pay>
- Immunisation Program - Expansion <http://www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/news-20171107>

The Victorian Refugee Health Network is monitoring the impacts of immunisation policy changes on refugee background communities and service systems. If you have case studies you would like to share to help inform our work please contact Lauren Tyrrell on 03 9389 8996 or tyrrell@foundationhouse.org.au. More information about the Network's immunisation projects may be found here: <http://refugeehealthnetwork.org.au/engage/immunisation-projects/>

Disclaimer: This information has been compiled by the Victorian Refugee Health Network for case workers supporting families from refugee backgrounds based on information from the Victorian Department of Health & Human Services and the Commonwealth Department of Health. Every effort has been made to confirm the accuracy of the information (developed April 2016, last updated July 2018) but please advise if any amendments are required. Please contact info@refugeehealthnetwork.org.au or the Victorian Refugee Health Network, 03 9388 0022.