

Routine childhood vaccinations: Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic



Supplementary Poll report

Poll 18, August 26 2020

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Report highlights

- One in five (20%) children aged less than five years have had a routine childhood vaccine delayed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Concern about catching COVID-19 at a health care service was the most common reason for parents delaying their child's vaccination

About the survey

In an online survey conducted from June 15 to June 23, 2020, Australian parents and carers were asked about the health behaviours of their children and themselves in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This supplementary report relates to questions presented to parents about their child's routine vaccinations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions relating to routine vaccination were presented to all parents and carers of children aged less than five years. For a report of the full Poll findings please visit www.rchpoll.org.au

The survey questions can be viewed at www.rchpoll.org.au

On February 27, 2020, the Commonwealth Government of Australia declared the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. From March onwards various levels of restrictions occurred across Australia. When completing the survey, respondents were asked to think about life 'since COVID-19' as being since March 2020.

Of note, at the time the survey went to field, schools, kindergartens and childcare centres in all states and territories had resumed face-to-face learning. Fieldwork was conducted just prior to the second period of Level 3 Stay at Home Directions in much of Victoria. Any interpretation of these findings requires consideration of the time sensitive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the different level of restrictions across Australia.

Parents report delay in routine childhood vaccinations during the COVID-19 pandemic

According to parent report, at the time of data collection, almost half (43%) of Australian children aged less than five years had been due to receive one or more routine childhood vaccinations since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (since March 2020).

Among those children due a routine vaccine, one in five (20%) had that vaccine delayed or put off according to parent report. Younger or female parents were more likely to delay vaccination of their children compared to older or male parents. Parents born overseas were less likely to report delaying vaccination than those born in Australia.

Concerns about catching COVID-19 main reason for delay in vaccination

Among the parents who reported a delay in vaccination of at least one of their children (n=59), concern about catching COVID-19 at the health care service was the most commonly cited reason (41%).

A further 17% said they were concerned about catching COVID-19 on the way to the health care service, such as on public transport or in a taxi.

Additional reasons for delay included parents feeling that they had too much else to worry about at the moment (28%), that the doctor or nurse where they usually take their child was not offering vaccines due to the COVID-19 pandemic (19%) and that vaccines were not important at the moment (10%) (see figure 1).



Reasons parents reported for delaying child's vaccinations

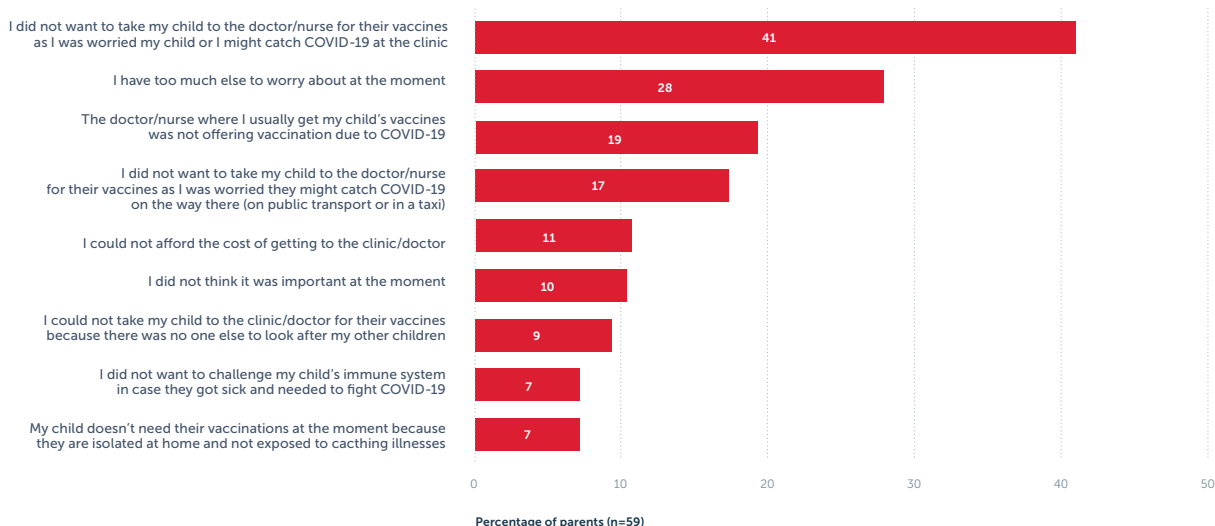


Figure 1.

Implications

With the issuing of Stay At Home directions throughout Australia for varying periods between March and June 2020, possible disruptions were anticipated to preventative and other non-emergency healthcare.

The findings from this Poll are based on the first data available to explore the impact on routine childhood vaccination in Australia. The National Immunisation Program Schedule is a series of immunisations given at specific times throughout life, beginning from birth¹. Our study suggests that a concerning proportion of parents have delayed scheduled routine vaccinations in young children, with the primary reason being concern about catching COVID-19 at a health care facility.

Additionally, those parents requiring the use of public transport or taxi services to reach a health care service were concerned about the risk of catching COVID-19 in their travels. Some parents also indicated that their regular vaccine providers were not providing a service during the pandemic.

Disruption to routine childhood immunisation programs puts individual children at increased risk of susceptibility to vaccine-preventable infectious diseases. It also poses a threat to the level of herd immunity in the community, creating increased likelihood of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, particularly once restrictions around social distancing and Stay At Home orders are lifted and young children return to child care and early learning centres.

It is critical to remind parents of the importance of protecting their children against serious vaccine-preventable diseases, even as the pandemic continues. This is of particular importance in those parts of Australia where Stay At Home directions are ongoing and community transmission is active, as parents in these areas may be more inclined to further delay vaccination due to concerns about COVID-19.

Coordinated efforts are required between health care providers and public health officials at local, state and federal levels to modify service models to safely deliver routine vaccination during the pandemic.

Current immunisation service models will require adaption to ensure adequate infection control, including physical distancing measures and appropriate use of personal protective equipment. Effective communication with parents and carers to reassure them that vaccine services are available and safe for their children is essential. Consideration of innovative models is also required, such as in-home vaccination and drive-through services to address barriers to service access identified by many parents. In the longer term, coordinated and targeted efforts will be required to achieve rapid catch-up vaccination in those communities where delays have already occurred.

Data Source

The report represents findings from a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of Australian parents and carers conducted by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

Parents of children aged less than five years (n=515) were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on the uptake of routine childhood vaccination. Collectively these parents provided data on 628 children aged between one month and less than five years. The estimates were subsequently weighted by state of residence, sex and the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage deciles to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The overall survey completion rate was 75% among eligible Online Research Unit panel members who were contacted to participate.

References

1. National Immunisation Program Schedule. Australian Government Department of Health. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/immunisation/immunisation-throughout-life/national-immunisation-program-schedule>

For a full reference list, please contact: child.healthpoll@rch.org.au

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