

# Talking about vaccination with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

This resource is a guide for creating culturally safe spaces to build rapport and have vaccination conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and families of all ages. It's designed to support providers to feel comfortable to have these conversations, and strongly recommend vaccinations.

## Building rapport

Building rapport leads to trust and a comfortable environment. Greet with a smile and take the time to chat with the person or family, before discussing their health. **Building rapport will take time and sometimes more than one appointment.**

*A person walks in wearing a sporting jersey or hat.*

"How'd your team go in their last game?"

"How is your week going?"

## Asking the question

It is really important to know whether people identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients receive the appropriate health care. **Don't assume. Always ask the question.**

"Do you/does your child identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or both?"

*If the patient asks why you need this information, you can say: "So we can make sure we provide the right services for your health needs."*

## Family considerations

Family is an important aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Some people may wish to have their family at appointments and may refrain from accessing services if they are unable to.

**Provide the flexibility** to have more people present at appointments. This also means flexibility to extend the appointment time to discuss questions with multiple family members.

*This is particularly relevant for families who have multiple children - it can be very challenging for parents to find childcare for children when appointments are restricted to one parent and one child. This also helps to provide services that cater to the whole family during one visit and make family members feel culturally safe.*

"Would you like to bring other family members with you?"

"You can bring your other children/family members along."



## Talking about vaccination with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (continued)

### Recording Indigenous status

**It is important to record the Indigenous status of the patient on their medical record** if consented to support clinical decision making, including vaccination. Additional vaccines are recommended and funded for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including Influenza, Pneumococcal, Hepatitis A (in some states and territories) and Meningococcal B for children.

Immunisation providers can also record Indigenous status directly on the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) and it will not be over-ridden by their status recorded by Medicare. AIR Indigenous status will not be recorded on any other government database, and it does not need to be the same as Medicare. **As a provider, seek approval from the person at the time of a vaccination visit, before recording their Indigenous status on the AIR.**

### Opportunistic vaccination

Consider every visit as the opportunity to have a conversation about vaccination and the opportunity to vaccinate.

Consider who else might require vaccination. Does the person have a family member in the waiting room or car who needs vaccination? **Offer everyone present the opportunity to be vaccinated.**

If possible, also consider offering vaccination for other people in their family who do not identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, for example a partner/father of children – to ensure the whole family gets protection.

"Did anyone else come with you today who might want the vaccination now too?"

### What else your service can do

- Ensure receptionists are aware of this guide (and advice included here), as they are the people greeting patients or accepting appointments
- If you're scheduling vaccination appointments, be flexible with your appointment times and offer to help with transport if possible.
- Remove barriers to accessing vaccination for families by removing any fees related to vaccinations or consultations.
- Make it known to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that there is no fee for vaccination or consultations.
- Avoid reprimanding a person if they miss an appointment and provide options to reschedule.
- Consider hiring an Aboriginal Health Worker who can act as a trusted community liaison with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, or link in with an Aboriginal Health Worker by asking your local state government or Aboriginal Health Unit. The Aboriginal Health Worker can also help non-Indigenous staff become more culturally aware.

## Talking about vaccination with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (continued)

### Clear recommendation to vaccinate

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people value a clear, strong recommendation to vaccinate. Sometimes people need a strong reminder about the importance of vaccination in order to vaccinate. **As a provider, your strong recommendation to vaccinate is very important.**

Explain to the person that vaccination will help protect themselves, their families, and communities, against serious illness and potential hospitalisation from communicable diseases, which can be very dangerous to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities due to the high prevalence of health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

"It's really important for your health and the health of your family for you to have this vaccination."

If the patient asks why it is important to vaccinate, you can say:

*"Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease that can put them at risk of getting sick from serious diseases (for example, flu or COVID-19). Getting vaccinated is the best way to prevent yourself or your family from getting very sick from these diseases."*

### Some things to consider when having a vaccination conversation with the person or the family

- Ensure the conversation occurs in a private and safe space.
- Don't rush a person or the family during their appointment.
- Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people don't make eye contact for various cultural reasons.
  - **Follow the other person's lead and lower your eyes during conversation.**
- Avoid rushing a response from the patient or the family and allow for silence.
  - **Observe and respect the silence.**
  - **Give the person time to process and respond.**
- Avoid interrupting the person or the family while they are talking.
- **Avoid using medical jargon.**
- Be transparent with information.
- Some family members may not have a Medicare card.
- Offer resources for the patient/family about 'normal reactions to vaccinations' so that they don't panic if a child has a mild fever or sore arm, etc.
- If possible, offer free Panadol (or voucher for Panadol) when vaccinating a child for Meningococcal B – so the family can follow through with the recommendations.

## Talking about vaccination with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (continued)

### Making your health service look more welcoming

Families may feel more comfortable if there is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork or posters displayed in your service and in consultation rooms.

### Other resources

For an example of a supportive flu vaccine conversation, see Example of a supportive flu vaccine yarn at [skai.org.au/healthcare-professionals](http://skai.org.au/healthcare-professionals).

For a list of resources designed specifically to support immunisation providers in having supportive vaccination conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, go to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources section on the SKAI website at [skai.org.au/healthcare-professionals](http://skai.org.au/healthcare-professionals).

### About this resource

This resource was developed by the Social Science team at NCIRS in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues: Ms Larissa Karpish, Ms Katrina Clark, Ms Kiya Shipley and Ms Sharon Brown. It was developed as a result of the findings of the NCIRS Social Science Aboriginal Influenza Vaccination Study.



For more information about SKAI, visit: [skai.org.au](http://skai.org.au).



For more information about vaccination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, see [www.vaccinationforourmob.ncirs.org.au/](http://www.vaccinationforourmob.ncirs.org.au/)  
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