

# **Pneumococcal vaccine –** helping to protect against pneumonia, meningitis and other serious illnesses



**Vaccination against pneumococcal disease  
for people aged over 65 or with certain  
health conditions**



**Public Health  
Agency**

## Contents

What is pneumococcal infection? .....	3
Who is at risk from pneumococcal infection? .....	3
What vaccine is used? .....	4
How safe is the vaccine? .....	4
How effective is the vaccine? .....	4
Who should get the PPV vaccine? .....	4
How many PPV vaccines will I need? .....	6
Does the PPV vaccine have any side effects? .....	6
Where can I get more information? .....	7



## What is pneumococcal infection?

Pneumococcal (pronounced 'new-mo-cock-al') is an infection that is caused by bacteria (germs).

Pneumococcus bacteria may be carried in the nose and throat of healthy individuals, without causing any symptoms. However, in a small proportion of infected individuals it can cause life threatening illness, such as:

- pneumonia
- septicaemia (blood poisoning)
- and meningitis (inflammation of the brain).

The germs that cause pneumococcal infection are spread by coughing and sneezing. They are most common in winter months.

## Who is at risk from pneumococcal infection?

A pneumococcal infection can affect anyone, but some people are at higher risk of serious illness. These include:

- babies
- adults aged 65 or over
- children and adults with certain long-term health conditions, such as a serious heart or kidney condition (see page 5 for a full list of conditions).

## What vaccine is used?

The pneumococcal vaccine used for adults and children over two years of age with underlying medical conditions, is the pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPV, Pneumovax®23). PPV protects against 23 types of pneumococcus germ, which cause about 9 out of 10 of all pneumococcal infections.

This is different to the pneumococcal vaccine offered to babies as part of the routine childhood programme. Babies are offered the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV, Prevenar13) at 12 weeks of age and a booster dose at 12 to 13 months. For more on this, visit [www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/childhood-immunisation-programme](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/childhood-immunisation-programme)

## How safe is the PPV vaccine?

All medicines (including vaccines) are tested before being used to assess their safety and effectiveness. Once they have been licensed for use, their safety continues to be monitored by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).



## How effective is the vaccine?

Getting the vaccine is the best way to help protect yourself against infections caused by the most common types of pneumococcal bacteria.

## Who should get the PPV vaccine?

You should get the vaccine (even if you feel healthy) if you are:

- aged 65 or over; or
- aged between two and 64 years and have any of the following conditions:
  - a heart problem
  - a problem with your spleen, for example sickle cell disease, or you have had your spleen removed
  - you are at risk of your spleen not working properly in future (for example, if you have coeliac disease)
  - a chest complaint or breathing difficulties, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or asthma that needs regular steroid inhalers or medicine
  - diabetes
  - kidney disease
  - liver disease
  - lowered immunity due to disease (such as HIV)
  - lowered immunity due to treatment (such as steroids or cancer treatment)
  - complement disorder (the complement system is an important part of the immune system, which helps fight infection)

- cerebrospinal fluid (the clear fluid that surrounds the brain and spine) leaking from its usual position – this could be due to an accident or surgery
  - a cochlear implant (this is a specific hearing device)
- are in a job that involves exposure to metal fumes (for example, if you are a welder).

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you think you need this vaccine.

### **How many PPV vaccines will I need?**

Most adults need only one dose of the PPV vaccine.

A small number of people should have a second dose of PPV vaccine after five years. This includes people with chronic (long-term) kidney disease, and those who have no spleen or whose spleen doesn't work very well. Your GP will be able to give you more information about vaccine doses.

PPV can be given at the same time as other vaccines, including flu and shingles vaccines.

### **Does the PPV vaccine have any side effects?**

Most people don't notice any side effects after the PPV vaccine. Some people may get some swelling and soreness around the site of the injection for a few days, or they might get a slight temperature. Other side effects are very rare.



You can find information about reporting side effects online at [www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard](http://www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard) or call the Yellow Card Hotline on 0800 731 6789 (Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm).

### **Where can I get more information?**

For more information contact your local GP surgery or visit: [www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/pneumonia](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/pneumonia)





**Public Health Agency**

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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