

Adult immunization: A critical investment for health, equity, and economic resilience



Demographic and environmental pressures leave us more vulnerable to infectious diseases

As populations age and NCDs increase, societies are becoming more vulnerable to preventable infectious diseases



- **Populations are growing older.** By 2050, the proportion of the 60+ population will nearly double.^[1]
- **The rate of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is growing**, including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory infection. NCDs affect over one in three adults^[2] – and the numbers are rising.^[3]
- For vulnerable populations, **infections can accelerate physical or cognitive decline**,^[4] leading to frailty, disability, and dependency.^{[5][6]}

The impact of infectious diseases can put a significant strain on health systems, societies, and economies



- **Hospital stays become longer**, discharges get delayed, and clinical teams become stretched^[7] – a burden amplified during winter seasons.^[8] This adds to a **growing strain on healthcare systems**, which are already under pressure from demographic changes^[9] and fiscal constraints.^[10]
- **Loved ones often shoulder the emotional and financial burden** of caring for ill relatives,^[11] and infections **exacerbate inequalities** and put the social fabric of society under strain.^[12]
- Infections **increase health expenditures**, putting pressure on national budgets,^[13] as well as reducing productivity – which cost G20 countries an estimated USD 1 trillion in 2019 alone.^[14]

Immunization is an effective public health strategy to help prevent and reduce the impact of infectious diseases throughout the life course

Vaccines are widely recognized as a safe and effective tool against infectious diseases by clinicians, scientists, and public health authorities

- **The World Health Organization (WHO)** rigorously monitors vaccine safety and **recommends immunization as a safe, effective tool to help prevent infectious diseases** globally.^[15]
- Leading disease-specific expert groups, such as the **European Society of Cardiology**^[16] and the **International Diabetes Federation**,^[17] endorse vaccination as critical to prevent disease complications and protect vulnerable populations.
- **Immunization saves up to 5 million lives each year** by protecting against infectious diseases that once caused widespread death and disability.^[18]
- **Immunization draws on a long history of success**, from eradicating smallpox to rapidly developing COVID-19 vaccines, immunization demonstrates the strength of science and global collaboration.^[19]

For adults, including the elderly and those living with NCDs, vaccination brings immediate and long-term benefits

- **Vaccines reduce the risk of acute illness** from infectious diseases, as well as long-term complications and loss of independence, helping **maintain active participation in work, caregiving, and community life**.^[20]
- For the elderly and those living with NCDs, protection can mean **maintaining quality of life, independence and dignity**, and **healthier aging**.^[21]
- **Vaccines reduce health risks for those living with NCDs**: for example, immunization from influenza may reduce heart attack risk by up to 66% for someone living with cardiovascular disease (CVD).^[22]
- The **WHO** and **World Federation of Public Health Associations** recognize a **life-course approach to immunization** as central for **unlocking the potential of immunization** and enabling healthy aging.^{[23][24]}

The benefits of adult immunization extend to wider health systems, societies, and economies



For care teams and health systems, better protection can mean reduced patient burden,^[25] preserved healthcare worker time and resources,^[26] and enhanced health system resilience.



For societal health, protection can mean decreased transmission,^[27] strengthened herd immunity, and better protection for vulnerable groups.^[28]



For economies and national finances, better protection can result in up to 19x ROI,^[29] safeguarding of economic activity, minimized healthcare costs, and mitigation of productivity losses.^[30]



For our societal structures, better protection can mean increased equity, public trust, and social cohesion.^[31]

Action is needed to harness the high-value opportunity of adult immunization

Policies have supported successful and cost-effective vaccination campaigns to protect the health of children, **yet significant gaps must be addressed to protect adult populations from infectious diseases.**^[32] Barriers include low awareness and under-prioritization, gaps in guidelines and eligibility that are unevenly communicated, limited ownership and coordination among providers, weak performance management, and fragmented data that prevent clear targets and accountability, confusing, cumbersome access that creates practical friction, social attitudes and mistrust that dampen confidence, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities that widen gaps.^[33]

Focus area	Actions needed
Elevate immunization across the life course as a public health priority.	<p>Adult immunization should reach equal footing as childhood vaccination in national health priorities and strategies and prevention plans, and be fully and effectively embedded in care pathways.^[34]</p> <p>To support, governments and health authorities, working with patient organizations and medical societies, should integrate life-course vaccination into health and aging strategies and prevention plans.^[35]</p>
Strengthen policy and funding frameworks.	<p>Adult immunization must be recognized as a strategic, cost-effective component of health and aging strategies.^[36] Life-course immunization approaches should be embedded in health planning, aligning adult vaccine schedules with pediatric standards and bridging current gaps in eligibility and accountability.^[37]</p> <p>To support, National Immunization Advisory Groups (NITAGs) should issue clear, timely recommendations that are both risk- and age-based while bringing in the perspective of geriatricians,^[38] governments should move adult vaccines into National Immunization Programs with stable budgets, and policymakers and health authorities should set and publicly track adult coverage targets.</p>
Empower healthcare professionals for greater access and uptake.	<p>The healthcare workforce plays a critical role in improving adult immunization and are the most trusted source of health information. They need clearer guidance, stronger support, and easier access to tools that enable proactive practice.^[39]</p> <p>To support, medical societies can embed vaccination in disease-specific guidelines, hospitals, universities, and clinics can train across specialties, and policymakers should enable physicians, pharmacists, nurses, and care teams to recommend and deliver adult vaccines.</p>
Manage adult immunization programs effectively.	<p>Adult uptake will not move sustainably without a performance management engine, including at national, regional, and local level that sets targets, uses timely data, and triggers action.</p> <p>To support, national health authorities should establish a performance system across national and regional/local levels that sets targets, uses timely data, and triggers action. Regional and local authorities, in partnership with civil society, can support by translating national targets into local action plans leveraging real-time data, while healthcare professionals can support by acting on reminders and share results back into the systems.</p>
Improve patient experience.	<p>Immunization must meet people where they are, physically, financially, and logistically. Making vaccination accessible requires rethinking delivery models and removing practical barriers.^[40]</p> <p>Health systems should simplify processes and adopt digital reminders, health authorities should enable vaccination through pharmacies and community sites with extended hours.</p>
Increase understanding and foster trust and confidence.	<p>Expanding adult immunization requires meaningful public engagement. People need to understand why vaccination matters, trust the information they receive, and see themselves reflected in campaigns and services.^[41]</p> <p>Public health authorities, policymakers, healthcare professionals, and civil society can support by working together to lead targeted campaigns using relatable local voices, engage adults on risks and benefits, and co-create accessible materials.</p>
Address equity barriers.	<p>Equity must be at the center of adult immunization strategies. Marginalized groups such as migrants, people experiencing homelessness, low-income groups, and those in remote areas face greater barriers, even when vaccines are technically free.^[42]</p> <p>Public health authorities, policymakers, healthcare professionals, and civil society can support by working together to identify, target, and reduce barriers for underserved groups, including expanding outreach through community-based services and ensuring communication is culturally relevant and accessible.</p>

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