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The New Zealand Herald

Call for free kids' flu jabs

By [Chloe Johnson BackpackJourn](#) [Chloe](#)

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Illness putting hundreds of under-5s in hospital, says Ministry of Health



Kyla McCormack with her twin boys Charlie and Nathaniel. Photo / Michael Craig

There are key questions in this article which any journalist worth their job should have asked, and answered but didn't. This is a parrot reporting, not journalism.

Free flu vaccinations are in the pipeline for children under the age of 5 after **an alarming number of toddlers** ended up in hospital last winter.

The Ministry of Health has lodged a request with drug-buying agency Pharmac to extend the eligibility of free influenza vaccines.

Health officials say **almost 400 children aged 4 and under were admitted to hospital with influenza last year**, and the rate was **particularly high** for those not yet 1.

The flu season is likely to start in the next three months and vaccination preparations are under way.

Free flu vaccines are currently only available to people aged 65 and over, pregnant women and people with health conditions.

Statistics New Zealand estimates there were **311,840** children aged 4 and under last year.

It could cost the Government **a further estimated \$8.8 million**, on top of the \$18 million spent last year, to make the plan happen.

One mother of constantly ill children, **Kyla McCormack**, hopes it gets the go-ahead. "It would be great to have the choice, especially for people who couldn't afford to pay for the vaccination."

Her **twin boys, Charlie and Nathaniel, aged 2, had low immune systems** and she **could not afford to take any more days off to look after them**.

"My boys are sick all the time because **they go to daycare and pick everything up**," McCormack, 37, said. Her four children, including two healthy teenagers, had all been vaccinated against meningococcal, tetanus and MMR.

The numbers of young children being admitted to hospital has been revealed in Shivers, a five-year multimillion-dollar flu study led by Environmental Science Research and National Influenza Centre director Dr Sue Huang.

It shows **infants aged younger than 1 had a higher influenza hospitalisation rate than the elderly**.

Parents can choose to vaccinate their children against influenza now, but are required to pay **\$19.40** for each flu vaccine, though prices vary among medical centres. Some children require two shots.

Pharmac spokeswoman Jude Ulrich said a subcommittee was reviewing the request as part of a cost-benefit analysis.

The outcome of the review would not be available until the end of the month, she said.

Dr Huang said healthy children should receive free vaccinations because they were most at risk of spreading the disease.

"The younger children being hospitalised **has been quite high for quite a few years**," Dr Huang said.

"They have a high disease burden and we need to do something about that."

It also impacted on productivity.

"Parents have to stay home to look after them and they **lose productivity** because of that."

- Herald on Sunday

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