

## Adult vaccination in India: A neglected health concern

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Adult vaccination has received considerable attention in North American and European countries, but the focus still remains quite low in India. Immunisation holds immense public health importance. Our country has given considerable attention to childhood vaccination, thereby reducing the burden of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases (VPDs) to a large extent. But adult vaccination also needs to be prioritised, as it can reduce the healthcare cost substantially. A large proportion of the Indian population is exposed to risk factors for infectious diseases like overcrowding, poor diet, low access to quality healthcare and inadequate sanitation. Older adults, especially those with an immunocompromised state, are at a higher risk. However, the impact of VPDs on India's adult demographic remains underestimated largely due to the limited surveillance of VPDs among adults. The 2017–2018 estimates from nationally representative data for individuals aged 60 years and above indicate a considerably low vaccination coverage. For instance, pneumococcal vaccine coverage stands at 0.74%, while the highest uptake is observed for diphtheria and tetanus vaccines at only 2.75%. While most international health agencies have long endorsed paediatric immunisation against VPDs, the prioritisation of adult immunisation has lagged, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

The risk of infectious diseases is shifting to later life because of improvement in childhood immunisation coverage, increase in life expectancy, waning immunity from childhood vaccinations, age-related immunosenescence, associated comorbidities, and gaps in immunisation coverage for adults. Surveys indicate that over 80% of adults are uninformed about the importance of adult vaccination. Even healthcare professionals are also not fully aware of the vaccines to recommend to adults, leading to missed opportunities for vaccination. The absence of a unified, nationally adopted guideline for adult immunisation creates confusion regarding which vaccines should be administered to adults based on factors such as age and underlying health conditions. There is limited access to adult vaccines, as they are not routinely stored or administered in public or private hospitals. Vaccine acceptance is highly influenced by cultural beliefs and trust in the healthcare system. In India, adult vaccination is impeded by inadequate infrastructure and lack of centres dedicated for this purpose. Due to the geographic, climatic, and infrastructural barriers, maintaining a robust cold chain becomes a challenge.

WHO's Immunisation Agenda 2030 promotes recommended vaccinations throughout the life course. Infections caused by influenza virus, streptococcus pneumoniae, RSV, and reactivated VZV in adults can burden the already strained healthcare resources. So, adult immunisation programmes can prove to be highly cost-effective. Additionally, adult immunisation programmes can increase health equity within countries by benefitting vulnerable populations and underserved communities.

In order to boost adult vaccination coverage in India, we must first generate data on the prevalence of VPDs and mortality caused by them, which is only possible through improved recording and reporting. This data must be analysed according to age groups so that attention

may specifically be drawn to the burden of VPDs in the adult population. Second, we need to conduct IEC activities for doctors as well as healthcare workers in order to educate them and make them aware of the need to utilise vaccines for adults. Third, the National Technical Advisory Group must frame recommendations on adult vaccination. Fourth, dedicated adult vaccination clinics must be proposed and made operational. Fifth, as part of a long-term vision, mainstreaming of adult vaccination through government primary healthcare facilities and Health and Wellness Centres under the Ayushman Bharat Program must be considered.

Through a strategic framework of enhanced public awareness, streamlined healthcare policies, and the establishment of accessible vaccination centres, India can aim to substantially reduce the burden of VPDs in adults. By prioritising high-risk groups and adopting a community-centric approach to healthcare, the country can ensure a more resilient public health system.

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