

Indigenous Elders 'In this together' for community health

As National Reconciliation Week starts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are being urged to visit their regular doctor or health worker, either via telehealth appointments or in person, in order to stay well and healthy.

Coodjinburra man Gordon Browning, Central Queensland, Wide Bay, Sunshine Coast PHN's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coordinator, said it's a particularly important message as COVID-19 restrictions start to lift and we head into flu season.

"The theme for this year's National Reconciliation Week is 'In this together', so making and keeping medical appointments can help keep your family and community healthy," Mr Browning said.

"The flu vaccine is especially important because the Elders in our community are more likely to get very sick from flu and need treatment in hospital.

"The flu shot is free for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over six months old, and you can get your free flu shot, like I did last week, at your GP, community health clinic, or Aboriginal Medical Service."

"It's really important for Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to keep up with their and their family's health care, and to make sure they don't miss immunisations and other vital health check-ups - particularly for those living with or at risk of developing chronic disease."

Today marks the start of National Reconciliation Week, which runs each year between 27 May – 3 June. The week takes on a particular significance this year, with 2020 marking the 20th anniversary.

Yugambeh woman Auntie Helen Felstead, who is the Chairperson of North Coast Aboriginal Corporation for Community Health (NCACCH), said it's an excellent time to consider the significant health inequities still facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"There needs to be a holistic approach to our health, by looking at housing, education and employment as well as health," Auntie Helen said.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are often affected by preventable diseases at a higher rate than non-Indigenous children, so getting our bubbas vaccinated is highly effective in reducing the rate of illness and death.

"Under the National Immunisation Program, we are doing really well, with over 92% of our 1-year-old bubbas immunised, and 96% of our 5-year-olds.

"This has been a big improvement over the last 10 years and hopefully we can continue to improve these numbers.

"I'm always onto my three daughters about getting my six grandchildren immunised and as soon as the flu vaccination is out each year, I'm on the phone to my family including my parents to tell them 'time for you flu jab'."

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Indigenous Australians experience a burden of disease that is nearly two and half times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, with chronic disease accounting for two thirds of that.

"We should still be continuing with all our health needs, even in these COVID times, and for those with a chronic disease, they still need to have it monitored," Auntie Helen said.

"You also need to go along and have your 715 health assessments done, and to just address any health concerns before they turn into major issues."

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As well as those living with or at risk of developing chronic illness, Mr Browning is also encouraging people with children under 18 months to continue with visits to their doctor or healthcare worker.

“All children under 18 months would typically see a doctor quite regularly,” Mr Browning said.

“We know early intervention is key for this age group, to make sure their health milestones are on track, so it’s really important parents make and keep those appointments.”

IMAGE AVAILABLE: Gordon Browning getting his flu shot from nurse Theresa Plover.

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