

# Malaysian Initiative Highlights Adult Pneumococcal Pneumonia Prevention



In a significant move to raise awareness about the deadly threat of pneumonia among adults, six medical professional bodies in Malaysia have jointly launched the ‘Prevent Pneumococcal Pneumonia’ (PPP) initiative on World Pneumonia Day. The PPP campaign is dedicated to safeguarding older individuals and high-risk adults from pneumococcal infection, a leading cause of pneumonia, primarily through vaccination. This groundbreaking initiative is spearheaded by the Malaysian Society of Infectious Diseases and Chemotherapy (MSIDC) and the Malaysian Thoracic Society (MTS), with the support of the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA), Malaysian Society of Geriatric Medicine (MSGM), Malaysian Society of Infection Control and Infectious Diseases (MyICID), and the Malaysian Family Medicine Specialists’ Association (FMSA).

## **Pneumonia, in top 3 causes of death in Malaysia**

During the initiative’s launch, Prof Dr Zamberi Sekawi, Chairman of the PPP Initiative, brought attention to the alarming statistics surrounding pneumonia in Malaysia. Pneumonia has persistently ranked among the top three causes of deaths in the country for over a decade. In 2021, an astounding 1 out of 10 deaths in Malaysia was attributed to pneumonia, affecting both men and women. Notably, pneumococcal bacteria account for approximately 27% of pneumonia cases worldwide, making it a formidable adversary.

While pneumonia awareness campaigns have primarily targeted children, Dr Zamberi emphasized that adults, particularly older individuals and those with underlying medical conditions, remain highly vulnerable to pneumococcal pneumonia. The PPP Initiative’s primary objective is to promote pneumococcal vaccination for these high-risk groups, urging healthcare professionals to make it a standard of care and encouraging the public to adopt it as a norm.

## **PPP as a collective effort**

The PPP Initiative intends to carry out a multifaceted approach to promote pneumococcal vaccination. Activities targeting healthcare professionals include publishing pneumococcal vaccination recommendations, conducting on-site interactive training, and offering online courses to educate them about the importance of vaccination. Simultaneously, public awareness campaigns will employ social media to promote a comprehensive pneumococcal pneumonia information website featuring a pneumococcal vaccination clinic directory.

Dr. Cheah lauded the collective efforts of the medical professional bodies involved in the PPP Initiative, recognizing their dedication to increasing awareness among vulnerable adults about the importance of pneumococcal vaccination.

## **Preventing antimicrobial resistance**

Dr. Cheah Wee Kooi, Head of Internal Medicine at the Ministry of Health Malaysia, highlighted another critical aspect of vaccination. Beyond protecting individuals from disease, vaccination plays a crucial role in reducing the risk of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Given the high prevalence of antibiotic resistance in pneumococcal isolates in Malaysia, the Ministry of Health has initiated pneumococcal vaccination for all Malaysian children born from 2018 onwards. The government also provides tax relief for vaccination expenses for individuals, their spouses, and children.

## **High-risk groups**

Dr. Azureen Azmel, an infectious disease physician and representative of MyICID, highlighted that beyond individuals with lung conditions, immunocompromised adults, including HIV and blood-related cancer patients, organ transplant recipients, and those on certain medications, are at high risk of contracting pneumococcal pneumonia. They are strongly recommended to get vaccinated.

## **Importance of vaccination**

Dr. Sally Suriani Ahip, a family medicine specialist and representative of FMSA, underscored that many older adults in Malaysia live with chronic diseases like diabetes, heart diseases, and chronic kidney diseases. She emphasized that diabetes alone increases the risk of pneumococcal pneumonia by 2.9 times, and this risk escalates with the presence of multiple medical conditions.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Pang Yong Kek, Co-chairman of PPP, also emphasised the pressing need for the public to understand that vulnerable adults require vaccination. A 2021 survey conducted by MTS revealed that only 24% and 26% of respondents believed older individuals and adults with underlying medical conditions should receive pneumococcal vaccination. He expressed gratitude to pharmaceutical companies for their continuous support in raising awareness about pneumococcal disease prevention among adults.

## **Preventing financial burden**

Dr. Lim Hong Tak, a geriatrician and representative of MSGM, added that a significant percentage of pneumonia patients aged 50 and above do not survive, while the financial burden of hospital admissions due to pneumonia can be substantial. Preventive measures, like vaccination, are crucial to ensure that older individuals can lead healthy lives without the looming worry of financial burdens.

Along the same vein, Dr. Muruga Raj, a general practitioner and representative of MMA, advocated for a shift towards prevention rather than treatment. In addition to vaccination, he stressed the importance of encouraging patients to quit smoking, vaping, and excessive alcohol consumption to reduce their risk of pneumococcal infection and pneumonia.