

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care

McGuinty Government's Free Childhood Immunization Program begins with pneumococcal vaccination

First Of Three New Free Child Vaccines Protects High-Risk Children Under Five

TORONTO, July 2 /CNW/ - The pneumococcal vaccination, the first of three new free child vaccines being introduced by the McGuinty government, is now available, Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman announced today. "Our government believes we have a duty to give every child the chance at a good start in life, and the best possible health," says Smitherman. "Today marks the beginning of our plan to protect and save the lives of Ontario's children, by vaccinating them against preventable diseases."

On July 1, free immunizations became available across the province for all high-risk children two years to four years of age for pneumococcal disease. This disease can cause pneumonia, meningitis and infection of the blood. High-risk children include those with a weakened immune system, heart and lung disease or diabetes. It is estimated over 10,000 children in Ontario will now be eligible to receive the free vaccine.

The government is investing \$156 million, over three years, to add the three new vaccinations for pneumococcal disease, chicken pox and meningitis. This plan will see 3.3 million Ontario children vaccinated without charge. The three new free immunization programs will save Ontario parents more than \$600 per child.

"I'm delighted we're responding quickly to parents who have been anxious to know when we would be starting our new free vaccination programs," said Dr. Sheela Basrur, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. "Vaccinations must and will be available to all who need them."

The second phase of the McGuinty government's comprehensive child immunization plan will take place in September, and the program will be fully implemented by January 1, 2005. Starting on that date, all children born

in Ontario on, or after, January 1, 2004, will have access to the three new free vaccines, as part of their routine immunization.

"The McGuinty government has demonstrated real leadership by adding the meningococcal and pneumococcal meningitis vaccines on the province's routine immunization schedule," said Kathryn Blain, Chair of the Meningitis Research Foundation, and a parent who lost her son to meningitis in 1995. "Ontario's move will help ensure that children no longer suffer the effects of these preventable diseases."

"Our government is making Ontario a leader in preventing childhood diseases," Smitherman said. "This is another big step in our plan to rebuild and transform this province's health care system into one that protects children, helps families, and benefits all Ontarians."