

Medical Bulletin

Welcome to the third South East Public Health Unit (SEPHU) Quarterly Medical Bulletin for 2024

In our last newsletter, we highlighted the start of the mpox outbreak in Victoria. The outbreak is ongoing with the highest number of cases notified in the month of September since the outbreak began this year. Apart from mpox, Victoria, like other states and territories, is experiencing a pertussis epidemic.

In this issue, we provide a summary, and highlight important considerations for medical practitioners in preventing as well as managing patients with these conditions.

We also provide an update on the changes to vaping law.

Mpox outbreak update

Since our last Medical Bulletin, Victoria has continued to see an increase in mpox cases. As of 24 September, 241 cases have been notified in Victoria this year, 72 of which were in the SEPHU catchment. Sexually active gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men remain the group at highest risk of infection.

Testing for mpox is best performed with a swab of rash lesion material (fluid or base of lesion) which is then sent for PCR. For patients with proctitis, an anorectal swab is recommended. Samples should be marked as “urgent” and sent to the Victorian Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory (VIDRL) via your routine pathology provider. Approval from the Department of Health is not required for mpox testing.

Mpox is an urgent notifiable condition under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* and requires notification both by medical practitioners and pathology services. Notifications are to be made by telephone to the relevant local public health unit on **1300 651 160** (24 hours a day) upon clinical suspicion or initial diagnosis (presumptive or confirmed).

Due to the emergence of mpox Clade 1b in overseas regions, please also ask patients about recent travel or sexual contact with others who have recently returned.

Mpox vaccine JYNNEOS is available free-of-charge for eligible people in Victoria, even without a Medicare card. Two doses, separated by 28 days, are required for optimal protection. Vaccination prevents severe disease, but infection can still occur.

Further information on mpox including information on vaccination can be found on the [Department of Health \(VIC\) website](#).

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Pertussis

The month of August marks the highest number of pertussis notifications received in 2024 for SEPHU, with a total of 560 cases. This is an increase from a total of 246 notifications received for the month of July. Just under half (43%) of notifications in 2024 were in the 10- to 14-year-old age group. SEPHU continues to work closely with schools and the Department of Education to monitor and provide support for outbreak management in educational settings.

Infants, particularly those less than six months of age, are at greatest risk of severe disease as they are too young to be fully immunised. Maternal vaccination during pregnancy can reduce infections in young infants by 90%. In 2024, nine pertussis cases aged less than 12 months were notified to SEPHU, with only three cases (25%) whose birth mother had confirmation of vaccination during pregnancy.

Please continue to offer pertussis vaccination to pregnant women.

It is recommended that pregnant women be vaccinated between 20 and 32 weeks gestation; however, vaccination can still be offered up to the time of delivery. Maternal pertussis vaccination is covered under the National Immunisation Program.

For further information on the current epidemic, please refer to the [Health Alert](#) issued by the Victorian Department of Health on 3 September 2024.

Supporting doctors to notify

Medical practitioners are required to notify a number of conditions either on suspicion (for urgent conditions) or on diagnosis (for routine conditions). Information about notification requirements can be found on the Department of Health webpage with further information on how to notify in our FAQs at the end of the Bulletin.

SEPHU is undertaking research to better understand the factors that act as barriers or facilitators for notification. The results will be used to help inform quality improvement activities within SEPHU.

We are currently inviting doctors to participate in an online survey about perceptions of making a public health notification.

The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete and is voluntary and anonymous.

The survey can be accessed here: <https://forms.office.com/r/49KxExzKpf>

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Further changes to vaping laws from October 2024

On 1 July 2024, changes were made to vaping laws in Australia to protect young people from the harms of vaping and nicotine dependence. These changes have allowed vapes or e-cigarettes to be regulated as therapeutic goods. This means that they are only available at pharmacies to help people quit smoking or manage nicotine dependence with a prescription from a doctor or nurse. It is illegal for other businesses such as tobacconists, vape shops or convenience stores to sell vapes or vape products.

From 1 October 2024, further regulatory changes will come into effect. Individuals aged 18 years or over will be able to purchase nicotine vapes directly from a pharmacy without a prescription. Individuals under 18 years of age will still need a prescription to access vapes to ensure they get appropriate medical advice and prescription. Additional changes include limiting the concentration of nicotine in vapes sold in pharmacies without a prescription to 20mg/mL, limiting vape flavours to mint, menthol and tobacco, and requiring that all vape products have plain pharmaceutical packaging.

SEPHU is working with its partner organisations to raise awareness of these regulatory changes and monitor their impacts on the broader population.

For more information on these reforms, visit the [Therapeutic Good Administration website](#).

Frequently asked questions

What diseases does SEPHU manage?

SEPHU now manages all notifiable communicable diseases with the exception of tuberculosis, which is managed by the Victorian Tuberculosis Program based at the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

How is SEPHU different to the Department of Health?

SEPHU, like other local public health units, has been established to provide place-based management of priority public health concerns in south-east Metropolitan Melbourne. Through strong connections with the local community, SEPHU is able to engage closely with priority populations and ensure that the public health response is targeted to those most in need.

The follow-up of communicable diseases by the SEPHU team is similar to that previously conducted by the Department of Health; however, there is capacity to provide enhanced follow-up across many more conditions. A good example is our work to improve access to care for people diagnosed with viral hepatitis.

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Can I call SEPHU directly for advice or to notify a communicable disease?

Urgent notifiable conditions should be called through to the central telephone number – 1300 651 160. Where appropriate, these calls will be forwarded directly to SEPHU. Routine notifiable conditions should be notified online at: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/infectious-diseases/notifiable-infectious-diseases-conditions-and-micro-organisms>. We are always happy to provide advice and assist where possible. Please email us at SEPHU.trace@monashhealth.org This inbox is monitored during normal business hours.

Does SEPHU have a webpage with information on communicable diseases similar to the Department of Health?

The SEPHU webpage has recently been updated – <https://sephu.org/>. Please jump on to find out more about the work we are doing and for information on how to notify communicable diseases.