



**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** October 1, 2021

**TO:** Hospitals, Ambulatory and Community Clinics, Skilled Nursing and other Long Term Care Facilities, and other Licensed Health Care Facilities

Health Officer

**SUBJECT:** Influenza Vaccination of Health Care Workers during Influenza Season – Updated for 2021

The winter 2020-21 flu season was historic and remarkable with the near complete absence of influenza virus circulating in the United States. This was likely due to the strict Covid-19 non-pharmacologic interventions that were in place last winter, including universal masking both indoors and outdoors, many indoor businesses closed or with strict occupancy limits, and K-12 schools operating in remote learning status. The forecast for the 2021-22 flu season is unclear. Our society is much more open this fall, with children back at school and most businesses operating at full capacity. Continued indoor masking practices, whether voluntary or required, may reduce the spread of influenza and lead to another mild season. Alternatively, the lack of exposure to circulating influenza virus last year may create a more vulnerable population this year and contribute to a severe flu season in 2021-22. Therefore, this year as we approach flu season, it is even more important to vaccinate our health care workers against flu in order to:

- Reduce the risk of spread of influenza to patients and co-workers;
- Minimize staffing impacts due to ill workers staying home from work; and
- Reduce diagnostic confusion, as flu symptoms and COVID-19 symptoms are very similar. Reducing the incidence of flu illness amongst your staff through widespread vaccination will reduce the need for symptom-based COVID-19 testing and potential isolation from work of symptomatic staff.

For the purposes of this letter, “health care workers” or “HCWs” are persons, paid and unpaid, working in health care settings who have direct patient contact or who work in



patient care areas. The influenza season is defined as **November 1<sup>st</sup>** through **April 30<sup>th</sup>** of the following year.

Influenza infection affects 5-15% of the US population every year, leading to an estimated 3.1 million days of hospitalization and 31.4 million outpatient visits. HCWs are both at risk for influenza and can transmit the virus to their patients and coworkers. Patients in our health care facilities are particularly vulnerable to influenza. Young children, the pregnant, the elderly, and those with chronic health conditions are at greater risk for influenza-related hospitalization and death. Furthermore, it is possible to become infected with flu and COVID-19 at the same time, which may increase the risk for severe illness.

In your role as a health care provider and mine as Health Officer, we share common goals: **reduce the spread of serious diseases such as influenza and COVID-19, provide outstanding health care, and protect our HCWs.** State law requires general acute care hospitals and certain employers to offer influenza vaccinations to employees. If employees decline vaccination, they are only required to sign a declination statement in lieu of vaccination. While compliance rates with these laws are high, actual HCW vaccination rates are not and may be below the level that will reduce the spread of infection in our health care facilities. Mandatory vaccination policies have been shown to increase HCW vaccination rates to above 95%.

We can protect both patients and HCWs from influenza disease, hospitalization and death by increasing rates of influenza vaccination of HCWs and reducing HCW-to-patient transmission of influenza and vice versa.

### **My strong recommendations regarding influenza vaccination this season:**

- All employees should be offered influenza vaccine. Employer mandates requiring all staff to vaccinate against influenza are strongly encouraged. Exemptions should only be granted for those employees who are able to provide an accepted medical exemption document signed by an MD or DO physician. True medical exemptions to the current influenza vaccine are rare.
- Providing on-worksite vaccination opportunities can be very effective in increasing vaccination rates amongst employees and are strongly encouraged.

### **Key points of information about this year's influenza vaccine options:**

- High Dose flu vaccine is an age-based vaccine for people 65 years and older. Please offer and encourage this vaccine to this population of employees but if it's not available, per ACIP recommendations you can and should offer standard dose flu vaccine so as to not miss an opportunity to vaccinate.
- The live virus nasal vaccine is approved as an option for use in healthy non-pregnant persons, 2 years through 49 years old.



- The flu vaccine can be safely given to residents with an egg allergy or mild illness (fever less than 102.5 F).

**Tips to increasing acceptance of the flu shot with your staff** (from <https://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p31115.pdf>):

- Keep it simple: *"Flu vaccine helps reduce risk of hospitalization and death."*
- Use a presumptive approach: *"Today, we are giving you your annual flu vaccination."*
- Communicate why we vaccinate: *"Vaccination prevents the severe outcomes of flu."*
- Communicate the variability and unpredictability of the flu: *"This is why it is best to get an annual flu vaccination."*
- Acknowledge that flu vaccine is not always a perfect match to the circulating strains, but it is the best way to protect against flu infection and serious outcomes, and any flu vaccination is better than none.
- **Inform staff that getting a flu vaccine is an important part of "flattening the curve" and helping COVID response efforts: *"Getting a flu vaccine helps keep flu illness out of our facility and maintains staffing levels, so we have more room, staff and equipment to treat both COVID and non-COVID patients."***
- These recommendations apply to hospitals, ambulatory and community clinics, skilled nursing and other long term care facilities, and any other health care facility.

I appreciate your help and support in protecting the residents of Contra Costa County, your staff and the residents you serve. For any additional questions, please contact our Contra Costa Health Services Public Health Division Communicable Disease Programs at 925-313-6740.

cc: Board of Supervisors  
Monica Nino, County Administrator

