



MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 1, 2021
TO: Residential Care Facilities for the Elderly in Contra Costa County

Health Officer

SUBJECT: Influenza Vaccination of Staff Members 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 all staff working with the elderly against influenza in order to:

- Reduce the risk of spread of influenza to residents 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, a staff member is a person, unpaid or paid, who has direct contact with residents or who works in resident areas of a residential care facility for the elderly (also known as assisted living facilities, board and care homes, or retirement homes). The influenza season is defined as **November 1st** through **April 30th** 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. Staff in residential care facilities are both at risk for influenza and can transmit the virus to residents and coworkers. Residents in these facilities are particularly vulnerable to influenza. Each year, 90% of influenza-related deaths and more than 60% of influenza-related hospitalizations occur in the elderly. 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 residential care facility operator and mine as Health Officer, we share common goals: **reduce the spread of serious diseases such as influenza and COVID-19, and protect your staff and elderly residents.** California law requires that facilities shall establish, implement, and maintain effective procedures for providing vaccinations against seasonal influenza to all employees with occupational exposure. While compliance rates with these laws are high, actual staff 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 staff vaccination rates to above 95%.

We can protect both residents and staff from influenza disease, hospitalization and death by increasing rates of influenza vaccination of staff and reducing staff-to-resident 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-worksites 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/p3115.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 care for all our residents."***

These recommendations apply to residential care facilities for the elderly (also known as assisted living facilities, board and care homes, or retirement homes) in Contra Costa County.

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

