

Influenza Prevention Policy

Frequently Asked Questions

Managers

Influenza – or the flu – can be a serious contagious disease, which is spread by droplet transmission through close contact with an infected person. Infected individuals are highly contagious and can transmit the virus for 24 hours before they show any symptoms.

Each year, there are approximately 3,500 deaths from influenza and its complications across Canada. Influenza causes by far the most deaths among vaccine-preventable diseases, outpacing all others combined. Hospitalized patients and seniors in residential care are more vulnerable to influenza than healthy adults. The vaccine is also less effective in the elderly and those with compromised immune systems, making it even more important that their caregivers are vaccinated.

Infected health care providers can pass the virus on to their patients before they even know they are sick. The most effective way to prevent the flu is by getting vaccinated and adopting additional preventative measures, such as proper hand hygiene and proper sneezing and coughing etiquette. Immunization helps physicians, health care providers and those who come into regular contact with patients reduce their risk of contracting influenza and spreading it to their patients.

To protect patients in our facilities, in 2012 British Columbia's health authorities adopted the Influenza Prevention Policy, requiring all employees, students, physicians, residents, contractors, vendors and volunteers to get immunized or to wear a mask during influenza season when in a patient care area. To further protect patients, the policy was expanded to include all visitors to our health care facilities.

How do I comply with the Influenza Prevention Policy this year?

All B.C. health care workers employed by a health authority and medical staff are expected to report if they choose to be vaccinated by self-reporting using an online system influenzareporting.org. This year, staff who choose the mask option are not expected to report.

To self-report, you must know your health authority employer and employee ID number, your home postal code, phone number and email, and (if applicable) the date of your flu vaccination and who vaccinated you (e.g., flu clinic nurse, family physician, pharmacist, public health, peer nurse immunizer). If you are employed by more than one health authority, you only need to report once using one health authority employee ID. The system will automatically notify your other employers.

By reporting your flu immunization, you are in compliance with the policy for the rest of the influenza season. If you choose to not be immunized, you will be required to wear a surgical/procedure mask in patient care areas for the duration of the influenza season to comply with the policy.

How do I know if my staff have been immunized?

You will receive regular reports indicating the names of staff who have been immunized. The remaining staff are expected to be masked in patient care locations. Managers are requested to follow up with staff who have not self-reported to ensure they are aware of the mask wearing requirement during the policy application period.

Can I post those reports to identify all staff who have been immunized?

No. Managers are being provided reports to meet their supervisory obligations – this information is not for public sharing. Managers must ensure that reports are securely stored and steps are taken to protect employee privacy.

What is the Policy Application Period?

During this period, all employees and individuals covered by the policy must have received a flu vaccination or wear a mask in patient care areas, and all visitors will be expected to wear a mask if they have not been vaccinated.

The Policy Application period will begin **Thursday, December 1, 2016**. The end date will be announced by the Provincial Health Officer, typically around the end of March.

When and where do covered individuals have to wear a mask?

The most effective way to prevent the transmission of influenza is to get a flu shot, and follow other preventative measures such as proper hand hygiene. If staff (or other covered individuals) are not vaccinated, they must wear a procedure mask whenever they are in a patient care area during the Policy Application Period.

What is a patient care area?

A patient care area/location is defined as an area within a health care facility, including a contracted facility, hallway or lobby, which is accessible to patients, residents or clients who are there to access care or services.

It includes any other location where care is provided, such as home and community care locations (including a client's home). It does not include locations such as administrative areas or private offices, which are not generally accessed by patients, residents or clients.

What type of mask should be worn?

Procedure masks are recognized for use in this policy. These have been shown to be effective in preventing the transmission of influenza.

When do masks need to be changed?

Masks should simply be changed when they get overly moist – there is no set time designated when they need to be changed.

It is important that used masks are disposed of appropriately. Please dispose of masks in an available garbage can, and follow proper hand hygiene protocols before replacing with a new mask.

An Ontario hospital has retracted its vaccinate or mask policy following an arbitration decision and BCNU has recently filed a similar grievance. In light of this, is B.C. considering withdrawing or amending the influenza prevention policy?

While it is within the BCNU's right to grieve, the decision in Ontario will not change the policy in B.C. – health authority employers will continue to help protect vulnerable patients and seniors from influenza.

Masking in B.C. was never positioned or intended to be coercive or punitive. The employee's right to choose is respected, which is why the option of wearing a mask is available.

In 2013, an arbitrator reviewed B.C.'s policy and expert evidence and agreed the policy was a reasonable exercise of management's rights to protect patients.

What do I do when an employee who is not vaccinated refuses to mask?

The policy does require all health care workers who have not had a flu shot to wear a mask when working in patient care areas. Each case will be reviewed individually to establish the facts and determine the appropriate response.

What happens if someone refuses to comply with this policy?

In 2013, a decision by a B.C. arbitrator stated that this policy is a reasonable and lawful exercise of the employer's management rights. Non-compliance with the policy may be cause for progressive discipline up to and including termination of employment.

All incidents of non-compliance should be addressed promptly, thoroughly and consistently. An investigation should be conducted, including interviewing the employee, to ascertain the facts and determine the appropriate response.

We recognize that each employee's professional and personal circumstances are unique and all requests for accommodations must be considered. Please contact your human resource representative for further details.

What is the medical duty to accommodate?

Any employee who believes they will experience negative health consequences from immunization and/or wearing a mask must request accommodation in advance so the employer can review the medical information and assess whether an accommodation is needed. Employees who have not requested accommodation are expected to comply with the policy.

For more information about non-compliance, please refer to the Responding to Employee Non-compliance with the Influenza Prevention Policy available through your human resource representative.

What is the role of senior management in implementing this policy?

There are several ways we are asking senior management to help implement this policy:

1. Support and actively promote our commitment to controlling the spread of communicable disease and to protect patients and staff from influenza.
2. Provide the financial and physical resources necessary to cover the costs of the annual influenza vaccination campaign, including space, support for facility vaccination clinics, administrative resources for data entry, recruitment/payment of flu champions and clinic nurses, access to pharmacy storage for facility vaccine, and supplies.
3. Ensure that directors, managers and supervisory staff co-operate with the influenza education and vaccination program and ensure employee compliance with the Influenza Control Program Policy.

4. Ensure that directors, managers and supervisory staff monitor prevention strategies and take appropriate action as outlined by policy and procedures.

What is the role of operations leaders/management in implementing the policy?

We recognize that all of our operations leaders and managers have a lot on their plates. However, we know you will agree that protecting our patients is our number one priority. We ask that, as respected leaders in our organization, you help implement this important policy in the following ways:

1. Ensure respectful compliance with this policy and support the influenza vaccination campaign as an important patient safety program.
2. In accordance with business operations and relationships, help to ensure that covered individuals are provided with information relating to the Influenza Prevention Policy and their responsibilities under the Policy.
3. Ensure employees are provided with instruction, training, supervision, and access to vaccination and/or masks to enable them to comply with this policy.
4. Regularly review reports of staff immunization status and encourage non-immunized staff to wear a mask in patient care areas during the Policy Application Period.
5. Ensure that all staff adhere to the communicable disease control requirements as outlined in this Policy.
6. Identify and follow up with non-compliant staff, in accordance with the collective agreement.
7. Ensure all new employees who may be hired after the initial employee influenza campaign has ended are aware of the policy and comply with the requirements outlined in this policy within two weeks of hire.
8. Raise any concerns regarding non-compliance with human resources. This will assist in identifying other supports or communication requirements.

We know that you are committed to protecting patients, and thank you for your dedication to their safe care and well-being.