



NEWS RELEASE

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Office of the Provincial Health Officer
BC Health Authorities

Influenza prevention measures to protect patients

VICTORIA – Health authorities in British Columbia are acting on the advice of Dr. Perry Kendall, B.C.’s Provincial Health Officer, and implementing measures to better protect patients and seniors from being exposed to influenza.

Beginning this year, health care workers who come into contact with patients at publicly-funded health care facilities or in the community, including at long-term-care facilities, will need to get the influenza vaccine, or wear a mask during the flu season.

“Influenza causes more deaths annually than all other vaccine-preventable diseases combined, and hospitalized patients are more vulnerable to complications from influenza than the general population,” said Dr. Kendall. “This policy will protect patients. Putting in place consistent policies to prevent influenza from spreading is the right thing to do from a patient safety perspective.”

The policy is in response to low vaccine coverage rates of health-care workers, and is part of comprehensive infection control measures developed by health authorities, acting upon the advice of public-health and patient-safety professionals, in collaboration with the Health Employers Association of BC. Other infection control measures include rapid identification of ill patients, adherence to hand hygiene, cough etiquette, the use of antivirals during outbreaks, and asking staff to stay home when ill.

“Health-care workers and the health-care system have an ethical and professional responsibility to protect vulnerable patients from transmissible diseases,” said Dr. Bonnie Henry, director of communicable disease prevention, at the BC Centre for Disease Control. “Patients should not have to worry that they could get sick from their care provider. Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect patients, as well as health care workers themselves and their families.”

The new policy applies to all health-care workers including health-authority staff, physicians and residents, volunteers, students, contractors and vendors who come into contact with patients.

Each year, health authorities provide the influenza vaccine for free to all workers, volunteers and students who work with patients, and encourage as many get vaccinated as possible. However, vaccinations rates have historically been less than 50 per cent.

“This decision has been made by all health authorities, acting upon the advice of the Provincial Health Officer, and ensures we are reducing the risk to our patients to the best of our ability,” said Dr. Nigel Murray, president and CEO, Fraser Health.

The influenza vaccine is extremely safe, and is the most effective way to prevent illness from the influenza virus, helping to prevent infection in healthy adults by up to 80 per cent.

“Ensuring that as a health care worker you are up to date on all of your immunizations – especially influenza – is a matter of patient safety,” said Dr. Doug Cochrane, chair of the BC Patient Safety and Quality Council. “People infected with the flu virus can be contagious for at least 24 hours before symptoms appear, so in some cases workers may be unaware they are transmitting the virus to their patients. Influenza is a source of significant complications in health care facilities and long term care homes each year, and health care workers must ensure that they do all they can to reduce patient harms.”

Canada’s National Advisory Committee on Immunization considers influenza vaccination for health care workers to be an essential component of the standard of care, and supports that workers should consider it their responsibility to get their flu shot each year.

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A backgrounder follows.

BACKGROUNDER

Protecting patients from influenza

- Influenza causes the most deaths among vaccine-preventable diseases, and hospitalized patients are more vulnerable to influenza than members of the general population.
- In addition to being a quality and safety issue, improved influenza vaccination coverage helps to reduce rates of employee illness. One study in a health care setting showed absenteeism related to respiratory disease reduced by 28 per cent.
- Flu shots are traditionally available around Thanksgiving each year. Flu season typically runs from late November/early December through to the end of March.
- Studies have demonstrated that health care workers who are ill with influenza frequently continue to work. In one study, 59 per cent of workers who tested positive for recent influenza infection could not recall having the flu, suggesting that many continued to work while unaware they were ill, potentially transmitting infection to their patients.
- Virginia Mason Medical Centre in Seattle was the first health care organization in the United States to implement a mandatory influenza vaccination policy in 2004. Since then, other organizations have implemented similar policies, including: the Hospital Corporation of America (163 facilities throughout the US); Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania; Children's Hospital of Philadelphia; Emory University Hospital and multiple community hospitals.
- In 2009, New York became the first state to require flu vaccine by health care personnel.
- B.C. will be the first jurisdiction in Canada to implement this provincewide policy. In the United States, there are many health care organizations and jurisdictions that have made this change to protect patients.
- Everyone can get the flu shot to protect them from getting the flu. In British Columbia, the flu shot is provided for free to those at higher risk of severe influenza illness and those who are close contacts or caregivers to people at high risk.
- It is especially important for people who are at increased risk of complications from influenza to get the flu shot each year.
- People who may be at increased risk include: seniors, people with chronic health conditions (especially heart or lung conditions), aboriginal people, or those with compromised immune systems.