Frequently Asked Questions About the Flu Vaccine Policy

How has the CHWC new flu vaccine policy changed since last year?
CHWC’s new flu vaccine policy requires all CHWC employees, volunteers, medical staff, temporary workers, trainees, students, contractors and vendors to receive a flu vaccine annually. Requests for exemption will be considered, and if approved, the individual must wear a medical mask when working anywhere within a CHWC facility (except break rooms and the cafeteria) during the period of influenza activity in our geographical area. This policy is in line with many other healthcare organizations and with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommendation that everyone over the age of 6 months receive a flu vaccine each year.

Why do we require the flu vaccine or masking?
The safety and well-being of our patients is the reason for this requirement. Our goal is to protect patients, employees and their coworkers and families from potential exposure to the flu. Each year, approximately 36,000 people die and 226,000 are hospitalized due to the flu. These are preventable deaths and hospitalizations. Requiring an annual flu vaccine demonstrates our commitment to protect the safety and health of our patients, many of whom already have weakened immune systems, as well as visitors, coworkers and our families.

Who does this policy apply to?
This policy applies to all personnel within CHWC: employees, medical staff and allied health professionals, students, trainees, volunteers, vendors and temporary workers. It does not apply to visitors.

How does the new policy affect me?
You will need to receive a flu shot or request an exemption. If your exemption request is approved, you will wear a mask throughout all areas of the facility, except break rooms and the cafeteria, from the day it is announced that flu activity has begun until the end date of flu season.

I’m not involved in direct patient care; I rarely work around patients. Do I need to get the flu vaccine?
Yes. The CHWC policy requires the flu shot, unless you are granted an exemption, in which case you must wear a mask. The flu shot or mask will not only protect your health, but reduce exposure to your coworkers and ultimately our patients. The CDC recommends the vaccine for all persons over the age of 6 months, especially health care personnel.
Why can't we just rely on good hand hygiene and masks within 6 feet of patients, like last year?
The flu can be spread to coworkers in many settings, including the elevators, hallways, nurses stations, offices, etc. Health care personnel can spread the flu virus throughout the facility even before they experience symptoms. When employees come down with flu they must stay home from work. This puts additional stress on the staff of busy units and offices and exposes coworkers and families to the flu.

By what date do I need to receive the flu shot?
Flu shot documentation deadline is December 4th this year. You will be required to do one of the following before December 4th:

1. receive the flu shot from CHWC, or
2. provide CHWC Human Resources department with proof of immunization if vaccinated through services other than CHWC (e.g., private physician office, pharmacy, other hospital, other employer)

By what date do I need to request an exemption?
Requests for exemption are due by November 6th, 2018 (send them to CHWC Human Resources.) They will be processed within 15 business days.

Will I have to do this every year?
Yes, the flu vaccine must be repeated annually, and you will be required to provide verification or request an exemption each year.

What if I am on a leave of absence and will not return until after December 4th?
All personnel who are on a leave of absence or have not been scheduled to work during the period that CHWC offers flu shots will be required to receive an influenza vaccination before they will be allowed to return to work. The vaccine may be received from CHWC prior to the return to work, or documentation of receiving the vaccine elsewhere must be submitted to Human Resources prior to the return to work.

When is flu season?
Influenza occurs year round. However, flu season is generally considered to be from September through March. The CHWC Flu Vaccine Team (FVT) will monitor flu activity and announce the start and end dates for wearing masks each flu season. These dates will be posted on Flu Shot Central, found on CHWCNet.

What if the flu season begins before the December 5 deadline?
If influenza virus begins to circulate in the area before that date, it will be announced as the flu season start date and all non-vaccinated staff must wear masks near patients. The November 6
deadline remains in place for submitting requests for exemption. The December 4 deadline remains in place for submitting documentation.

Where can I get a flu shot?
The Employee Flu Shot Program at CHWC provides free flu shots at all three facilities and will even be available at the Healthy Horizons screenings, Hand Hygiene Fun Days and CHWC employee picnic. The schedule is posted on Flu Shot Central. Some changes may occur to the schedule periodically, so check back for updates.

You may also go to your personal care provider, pharmacy, injection clinic or other healthcare provider for your flu vaccine. Present documentation from outside health services to CHWC Human Resources before December 4, 2018.

What counts as proof of immunization?
There are several types of documentation we will accept: a document (example—MyChart document) from the healthcare provider; a receipt from a pharmacy showing that you received this year's flu vaccine or a similar document. You must provide this to Human Resources (employees and volunteers), to the Medical Staff Office (non-employed physicians and credentialed allied health professionals), or as directed. This must be submitted by December 4, 2018.

What if there is a shortage of vaccine?
In the event of an influenza vaccine shortage or distribution problems, CHWC Flu Vaccine Team (FVT) will determine an appropriate distribution plan for the resources available. Priority will be given to those who provide hands-on patient care to our most vulnerable patients.

If I get a flu shot outside of CHWC, will I be reimbursed?
No, but the vaccine is covered by most insurance providers.

How effective are flu vaccines, especially since virus strains keep changing?
The flu vaccine is the most effective way to prevent the flu. The vaccine is up to 90 percent effective in preventing influenza in healthy adults. Public health officials have a good track record of predicting the three main flu strains that will cause the most illness during each flu season. These strains usually change each year which is why the vaccine is given annually. Even if you get the flu from a strain of the virus that wasn’t included in the vaccine, having the vaccine can make your illness milder. That means you will feel less sick, miss fewer days of work and be at lower risk for possible complications of the flu.

Once you get a flu shot, how long does it take before you are protected?
Generally, up to a couple of weeks. That’s why it’s best to get your flu vaccine early, before flu season is in full swing.
If I get the seasonal flu vaccine in the early fall, will I still be protected if the flu season continues into March or April?
Yes. Protection from the particular strains included in the vaccine will last for the entire season.

Is it true that you can get the flu from the flu vaccine?
This is NOT TRUE. You cannot get the flu from the flu vaccine. The viruses in the vaccine are killed so that they cannot cause the flu. Some people mistakenly confuse flu symptoms with potential vaccine side effects such as a minor fever.

Will the flu vaccine make me feel ill?
Almost all people who receive the influenza vaccine have no side effects. Some people may experience minor side effects. If these occur, they begin soon after the shot was given and usually last no more than one to two days. The most common side effects are:
- Soreness, redness or swelling where the shot was given
- Low-grade fever and aches

I am pregnant. Should I get the flu vaccine?
Yes, pregnant women should receive the flu shot. It is especially important for pregnant women to get the flu shot as you are more likely to have serious complications to yourself and your pregnancy if you get the flu. Once you get the flu shot, your body will start producing antibodies that will help protect you against the flu, and this protection can be passed to your unborn baby. According to the CDC, you can receive the flu shot at any time, during any trimester, while you are pregnant.

Does the CHWC vaccine contain mercury?
No. Thimerosal is an ethyl mercury-based preservative used in some flu vaccines. CHWC vaccine is single-dose and preservative-free.

Who is at most risk for getting the flu and flu-related complications?
To learn more about flu and flu-related complications, check out the CDC's information. However, persons younger than 5 years old, older than 65 years old, pregnant women and people with various chronic health conditions are at increased risk.

I’m very healthy and never get the flu. Why should I get the flu vaccine?
Working in a health care environment increases your risk of exposure. You may become infected and experience only mild symptoms but still pass the virus to patients, coworkers and members of your family.
I’m very familiar with the symptoms of the flu and I stay home when I am sick. So, there is very little chance that I would spread the flu to others. Why should I get the vaccine? The signs and symptoms of the flu may not appear for a day or two after you contract influenza, during which time you could unknowingly infect patients and coworkers.

Can’t I just take antiviral drugs if I get the flu?
It is best to take precautions to prevent the flu with annual immunization, good hand hygiene, and respiratory etiquette. By the time you seek treatment for the flu, you may have already passed on the virus to patients, coworkers, and family because shedding may occur up to two or three days prior to symptom initiation. Also, resistance to antiviral drugs can develop in circulating virus strains.

What should I do if I catch the flu?
Most people with the flu have mild illness and do not need medical care or antiviral drugs. If you get sick with flu symptoms, in most cases, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to get medical care. If, however, you have symptoms of flu and are in a high risk group, or are very sick or worried about your illness, contact your doctor or other healthcare provider. Your doctor may prescribe antiviral drugs that can treat the flu. These drugs work better for treatment the sooner they are started.

EXEMPTIONS
What about an individual who has medical or religious reasons for declining vaccination?
An exemption to the vaccination policy may be requested for certain medical reasons, including documentation of severe allergy to the vaccine or components as defined by the most current recommendations of the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) or a history of Guillain-Barré Syndrome within six weeks of a receiving an influenza vaccine. If receiving the vaccination conflicts with sincerely held religious beliefs, you may submit a request for religious accommodation.

What documentation do I need to provide to request a medical exception?
Healthcare personnel requesting a medical exception must submit a declination form and a request for medical exemption form to Human Resources by November 6, 2018. These forms can be found on the Flu Shot Central site. The policy is also included in this webpage.

My religion requires me to decline vaccination. What should I do?
If you are requesting to decline the vaccine for religious reasons, you must fill out the declination form and a request for request for religious or conscience exemption and submit it
to Human Resources by November 6, 2018. These forms can be found on the Flu Shot Central site.

I have declined the flu shot every year, but not for medical or religious reasons. Can I apply for an exemption?
Yes, if it is documented that you declined to receive the vaccine from CHWC during the 2017-18 flu season. You must fill out the declination form and submit it to Human Resources by November 6, 2018.

Who decides whether to approve an exemption request?
The Influenza Vaccination Declination Committee, a group comprising the Vice President of Human Resources and Senior Administration representatives-at-large, will be responsible for reviewing, approving or denying requests for influenza vaccination exemptions.

If my declination for medical or religious reasons is approved, will I still be able to work?
Yes. Those who receive exemption approval will be required to properly wear a protective medical mask over their mouth and nose within any CHWC facility during the period of influenza activity (the CHWC Flu Vaccine Team will declares when active flu season begins and ends). This important step to prevent flu transmission is supported by national patient safety and infectious disease prevention organizations. Anyone who is granted a medical exemption or religious accommodation but who fails to wear a surgical as specified by the policy during the influenza season will be subject to corrective action.

COMPLIANCE

What happens if I don’t want to get the vaccine?
All CHWC employees covered by this policy who fail to comply and who have not received a medical or religious exemption will be considered noncompliant with annual influenza vaccination requirements and will immediately be placed on a leave of absence without pay until they have fulfilled the policy’s requirements, up to and including three business days. If requirements are not completed in the stated three business day window, their employment with CHWC will be terminated.
1% employees of CHWC who are noncompliant with annual influenza vaccination requirements will be suspended from ALL work activities from the official date the flu season begins until the date flu season ends, or until compliant.
Non-employed medical staff must submit proof of influenza vaccination or receive the influenza vaccine upon their first day of work at CHWC during influenza season. Compliance issues for Medical Staff are referred to the Medical Executive Committee for review and action.
Volunteers, vendors, trainees, students, or temporary workers who do not provide proof of immunization by December 4, 2018 will not be permitted on the premises any CHWC facility. Exemptions will generally not be available to this group, although there may be some discretion given to department leaders, depending upon needs.

**How will my supervisor and others know that I have received the flu shot?**
Health care personnel approved for an exemption will be required to attach a small identifier tag to their CHWC ID badge. Flu shot buttons indicating that the flu shot was received will be available for all employees to wear, but they will be optional, not mandatory.