

Visitors to Hospitals and Health Care Facilities

Influenza Control Program

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 or visitors to health care facilities can pass the virus on to their patients or loved ones 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 protect patients in our facilities, in 2012 British Columbia's health authorities adopted the Influenza Control Program 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.

Why is it Important for me to get my flu shot?

Influenza – or the flu – spreads very easily, and can cause serious complications or death in vulnerable people, including hospital or residential care patients. You can spread influenza for 24 hours before you have any symptoms, so you can pass the flu on to your family and friends before you even know you are sick.

The most effective way to prevent the spread of influenza is by getting a flu shot and washing your hands regularly. If you don't get a flu shot, you will be expected to protect hospital patients by wearing a mask while you are in a health care facility during flu

season. This means you are expected to be immunized or wear a mask when visiting patients from the beginning of December through to the end of March.

We also ask that you wash your hands or use hand sanitizer at available hand hygiene stations throughout the facility.

By following this policy, you will help to protect your loved ones – the people you are here visiting – from getting a potentially serious illness.

What are the health care facilities that will follow this policy?

All health care facilities that serve and treat patients will be covered by this policy. This includes:

- Hospitals including emergency rooms and admitting offices
- Clinics
- Health care centres
- Long-term residential care facilities
- Urgent care facilities

When do I need to be vaccinated?

Flu season is generally from around the beginning of December to the end of March, so if you are visiting patients during that time period, you will be expected to be vaccinated or wear a mask.

What ages are covered by this policy?

Ages six months and older are covered by this policy. Anyone younger than six months is not eligible to receive the vaccine.

Parents and guardians of infants younger than six months are advised to take the same precautions to protect their infants from contracting the influenza virus if they are visiting a health care facility as they would anywhere else in the community.

When and where do I have to wear a mask?

If you have not had a flu shot, you are expected wear a mask at all times in our facilities, except when eating or drinking.

Where do I get a mask?

Masks are provided at the entrance, and at various other locations throughout the facility. If you need help finding a mask, please ask at the reception desk.

Is there a cost for the vaccine?

Many people visiting someone in a health care facility will already be eligible for a free flu shot, as regular, close contacts of someone at high risk. If you do not meet these criteria, or any of the other listed eligibility criteria, tell your health care provider that you will be visiting a health care facility and you will not need to pay for the flu shot.

In B.C., the flu shot is provided free this year to the following groups of people at high risk of serious illness from influenza, such as:

- Children six months to less than five years of age
- Pregnant women who are at any stage of pregnancy during the influenza season
- Seniors 65 years and older
- Residents of any age living in residential care, assisted living or other group facilities
- Aboriginal people
- Children and teenagers required to take Aspirin® or ASA for long periods of time due to a medical condition
- Children and adults with certain medical conditions, including:
 - Heart or lung disorders that require regular medical care, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or cystic fibrosis
 - Kidney disease, chronic liver disease such as hepatitis, diabetes, cancer, anemia, or weakened immune system
 - Those with health conditions causing difficulty breathing, swallowing, or a risk of choking on food or fluids, such as people with severe brain damage, spinal cord injury, seizures or neuromuscular disorders
 - Those who are very obese

Where can I get my flu shot?

There are many places you can get immunized:

- At your doctor's office
- At a local pharmacy
- At a public health clinic

To find the nearest flu shot public health clinic, visit www.islandfluclinics.ca or call HealthLink BC at 8-1-1.

For more information about the flu shot, visit www.viha.ca/flu

Thank you for your commitment to keeping your loved ones and our other hospital patients safe.