

Q & As

This year, Health PEI has implemented a new *Influenza Immunization and Management Policy*. This policy requires that all health care staff, volunteers, students and contractors who come into contact with patients, in both clinical and public areas, are required to be vaccinated with the seasonal influenza (flu) vaccine or wear a surgical mask when within two meters of a patient during flu season.

Q. What is the flu?

A. Flu is a virus that infects the nose, throat and lungs. It is not to be confused with “stomach flu”, the common cold or other illnesses. People of all ages, including the young and healthy individuals, may exhibit the following flu symptoms: fever, headache, general aches and pains, fatigue and cough. The flu usually lasts five to seven days, but the cough and fatigue can take much longer to resolve.

Q. How does flu spread?

A. Flu spreads from infected people through coughing and sneezing or by touching surfaces that have been contaminated by an ill person and then touching your eyes, mouth or nose. You can unknowingly pass on the flu without showing any symptoms.

Q. Who is at risk for complications of flu?

A. Everyone is at risk of infection from the flu virus; however, some people are at a greater risk of complications:

- Adults and children with certain chronic medical conditions
- Residents of nursing homes
- People 65 years of age and older
- Pregnant women
- Morbidly obese people
- Aboriginal people

This is the population that we as health care providers and staff work with every day in all of our facilities. Remember, both patients and clients are more vulnerable to complications from flu than the general population.

Q. How does the flu vaccine work?

A. A new vaccine is made each year to protect against three strains of flu viruses that research indicates are most likely to be circulating and to cause illness in the up-coming flu season. The vaccine stimulates your body’s immune system to build antibodies, making it stronger and ready to fight off the illness before it starts.

Q. Can we get the flu from the vaccine?

A. No, the vaccine will not give you flu since it contains inactivated (dead) flu virus.

Q. Is the vaccine safe?

A. Yes! It is the most effective way to protect against flu. Most people who get the vaccine have either no side effects or mild side effects such as soreness, redness or swelling at the injection site, which occurs within one or two days after vaccination.

Q. Is the flu vaccine associated with Guillain-Barre Syndrome?

A. There have been very rare cases where the vaccine has been associated with this syndrome - only one case for every one million doses given has been reported. Influenza infection is associated with a risk of GBS 40-70 times greater than the risk of GBS following influenza vaccine.

Q. Where can I get the vaccine?

A. Health PEI offers clinics to staff, physicians, students and volunteers in various facilities. Calendars are posted in facilities and will be posted on the Staff Resource Centre. You can also obtain your flu shot through your family doctor or through a pharmacy at no cost.

Q. Why are we doing this?

A. Simply stated, patient safety! This policy is to protect our patients. Having a consistent policy to prevent flu from spreading is ***the right thing to do!*** Health care workers with influenza can be infectious at least one day before their initial signs and symptoms. Most will continue to work when ill with influenza, particularly if the illness is mild. Approximately 20% of ill health care staff will not have symptoms yet are still infectious. The masks protect patients from infected health care workers who have limited or no symptoms.

Q. Who does the policy apply to?

A. The policy applies to all healthcare workers, which includes all employees (casual, temporary, permanent, full-time, part-time), physicians (salaried, fee-for-service, contract and locum), students, volunteers and contract workers who are involved in providing care and/or services within Health PEI facilities and programs. If you have questions about whether this will impact you during flu season, please check with your supervisor or manager for further information.

Q. What about when I am working in my office, workstation, or other non-patient care areas?

A. If you are not vaccinated, or have received your vaccination in the last 2 weeks, you must wear a mask at all times when you are within 2 metres of any patient in a patient care area. A "patient-care" is 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 also 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 however, if a patient is in your office/work area and you have not received your vaccine, you are required to wear a mask while in their presence if they are within two meters of you.

Q. If I don't get the vaccine, when will I have to start wearing a mask?

A. Flu season generally begins in the late fall. Each year, physicians and infection control nurses monitor for cases of the flu in our province. An email communication will be distributed to all staff by leadership to advise when the influenza season has officially commenced and policy requirements are in effect.

Q. What kind of mask will I have to wear?

A. Your manager will have a supply of regular surgical masks on hand.

Q: Can I bring my own mask to wear?

A: No, you must wear a mask provided by Health PEI to ensure that infection control standards are met.

Q. How do you know who is required to wear a mask?

A. Only your immediate manager and Employee Health or designate know. Managers are provided with a list of their staff that has not had the flu vaccine.

Q. What if influenza precautions are put into effect and I have not had a chance to be vaccinated yet?

A. It is not too late to get the flu vaccine. Employee Health will continue to provide flu vaccines. Since it takes two weeks for you to develop immunity, you will be required to wear the mask during that period of time. You can also obtain your flu shot through your family doctor or through a pharmacy at no cost.

Q. Do I have to change my mask between patients?

A. According to Infection Control Guidelines, just like gloves, employees are required to change masks between patients. There are certain circumstances where changing masks between patients may not be necessary such as when travelling the corridors on nursing units where there are patients in the corridor or other activities where you are not touching either the patient or their bedside area/furniture. If you have specific scenarios please ask your manager for clarification.

Q. How often do I need to change my mask?

A. According to Infection Control Guidelines, masks are required to be changed when moist/wet/soiled. There is no set timeframe required to change them. If you are taking your mask off to eat, you should put a new mask on afterwards.

Q. What will happen to me if I am within two meters of a patient and don't wear the mask?

A. As per Health PEI's *Influenza Immunization and Management Policy* the use of a mask is required if you have not been vaccinated. If you choose not to wear the mask, you are subject to the consequences of not following a policy. If you have concerns or questions, please talk with your manager/supervisor.

Q. What if I work in the community or out-patient setting?

A. These settings are no different than the hospital setting; you are required to wear a mask during patient contact within two meters. The only time that this might not be required, would be in a group counseling or education session when you can maintain a two meter distance.

Q. Why do visitors not have to wear a mask?

A. Health PEI encourages the public to take proper precautions when visiting hospitals or health care facilities. Information on the flu and masks are available to all visitors; however, Health PEI does not have the authority to enforce the use of masks unless a specific threat is detected or in situations where outbreak precautions are in place.

Q. Do we need to tell our patients and visitors why we are wearing masks?

A. Yes. Take the opportunity to educate our patients and visitors about the flu and how easily it can be spread. Health PEI is encouraging staff and others to respond to patient and visitor comments and questions with statements such as: "Prince Edward Island is now in flu season. To protect your health and the health of all our patients, Health PEI requires us to wear a mask or get a vaccine. I have chosen a mask." By focusing on patient safety, Health PEI is confident our patients and visitors will support our staff through this period.

Q. What if I get my flu vaccine from my physician or another provider?

A. You need to provide this information and documentation of the received influenza vaccine to your site Employee Health Nurse (or designate) and/or your manager and it will be added to your employee health file.

Q. Is the Flu Mist an alternative to the flu shot?

A. The Flu Mist is only available for children between the ages of 2-17.

Q. Who can I contact if I have more questions?

A. You can contact your manager or supervisor, Employee Health Nurse, or Infection Control if you have further questions. You may also wish to contact the Provincial Infection Control Coordinator at (902) 894-0133, or your local HR Manager.