

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 3, 2024

TO: Hospitals, Ambulatory and Community Clinics, Skilled Nursing and other Long Term Care Facilities, other Licensed Health Care Facilities, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Provider Organizations.

FROM: Uldine Castel, MD
Interim Health Officer

SUBJECT: Mandatory Influenza Vaccination or Masking of Health Care Workers During Influenza Season

As Interim Health Officer for Ventura County, I am now re-issuing a Health Officer order mandating that all licensed health care facilities and ambulances in Ventura County require their health care workers (HCWs) to receive an annual influenza vaccination or, if they decline, to wear a mask during the influenza season while working in patient care areas.

Rationale

In the United States, the standard influenza season typically begins the first week of September and ends the last week of May. Historically, we have observed that the increased period of community transmission within Ventura County occurs over a 4-to-6-week period sometime between December and March. Although we commonly observe a single peak of influenza activity during this period, since the 2017-2018 season we have increasingly experienced multiple waves of heightened activity further into the spring, which is why the order has been extended through April 30. Due to waning immunity, the timing of vaccination is crucial to ensuring protection throughout the season while still allowing time to develop immunity prior to the period of increased transmission.

The likelihood of co-circulation of multiple respiratory pathogens and various influenza strains remains a concern. Co-infection with multiple influenza viruses or other respiratory pathogens can exacerbate the burden of illness throughout the community and increase the risk of observing more severe illness outcomes. This has the capacity to overburden our healthcare system as well. Increasing population-level immunity through vaccination remains our best strategy to prevent influenza infection, complications, and deaths, thereby preventing a strain on our healthcare system. Healthcare workers should be equipped to respond to the evolving needs of our community during the respiratory illness season, while protecting themselves against influenza infection through vaccination.

For the first time since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we noted that during the 2023-2024 season emergency department visits related to influenza surpassed those pertaining to COVID-19 at the height of the respiratory illness surge. We also observed slightly decreased influenza vaccination rates throughout the community overall. As we continue to move forward from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's crucial to re-emphasize the importance of seasonal influenza vaccination and the need to stay protected against this illness which can impart significant morbidity among susceptible individuals. Influenza infection affects 5-15% of the US population every year. The CDC estimates that influenza has resulted in between 9.2 million and 35.6 million illnesses, between 140,000 and 710,000 hospitalizations and between 12,000 and 56,000 deaths annually since 2010. HCWs are both at risk for influenza and can transmit the virus to their vulnerable patients. Influenza vaccination of HCWs protects patients and

reduces employee absenteeism during influenza season. State law requires that general acute care hospitals and certain employers offer influenza vaccinations to employees (Cal. Health & Safety Code, §1288.7, subd. (a); 8 Cal. Code Regs., § 5199, subd. (c)(6)(D) and (h)(10)). If hospital employees decline vaccination, they are required to sign a declination statement in lieu of vaccination (Cal. Health & Safety Code, §1288.7, subd. (a); 8 Cal. Code Regs., § 5199, subd. (c)(6)(D) and (h)(10)). This order enhances patient protection by requiring unvaccinated HCWs to wear a face mask in patient care areas during the influenza season. Mandatory vaccination combined with masking policies for unvaccinated HCWs have been shown to increase HCW vaccination rates.

In your role as a health care facility or EMS provider and mine as Health Officer, we share common desires: reduce the spread of serious diseases such as influenza, provide outstanding health care, and protect our HCWs. Our goal is to increase rates of influenza vaccination of HCWs, reduce employee absenteeism during influenza season, and reduce HCW-to-patient transmission of influenza. While compliance rates with the laws referenced above are high, actual HCW vaccination rates are not and may be below the level that will reduce the spread of infection in our health care facilities. Mandatory vaccination or masking policies have been shown to increase HCW vaccination rates to above 95%.

Order

I, as the Interim Health Officer of Ventura County, am requiring that each and every licensed health care facility and EMS provider organization in Ventura County implement a program requiring its health care workers to receive an annual influenza vaccination or, if they decline, to wear a mask for the duration of the influenza season while working in patient care areas in that health care facility or while caring for EMS patients.

Authority for Order

This order is issued pursuant to Section 120175 of the California Health and Safety Code, which authorizes local health officers to take measures as may be necessary to prevent the spread of communicable disease or occurrence of additional cases.

Duration of Order

This order is ongoing and applies to each influenza season unless the order is rescinded. The influenza season is defined as **November 1 to April 30** of the following year. In any given year, if influenza surveillance data demonstrate an unusually late peak and continued widespread influenza activity in the spring, I may extend the period during which the masking program shall apply for that year.

Facilities Subject to the Order

This order applies to hospitals, ambulatory and community clinics, skilled nursing and other long term care facilities, jail medical facilities, dialysis centers, any other licensed health care facility and EMS provider organizations.

Definition of HCWs

For the purposes of this order, "health care workers" or "HCWs" are persons, paid and unpaid, working in licensed health care settings who have direct patient contact or who work in patient care areas, including EMS prehospital care and interfacility transfers.

For more information please visit the CDC masking policies for healthcare workers:

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/infectioncontrol/maskguidance.htm>

I appreciate your help and support in protecting the residents of Ventura County. For any additional questions, please contact our Ventura County Public Health Division of Communicable Diseases at 805-981-5201 or e-mail to PH-Admin@ventura.org