

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 8, 2021

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: Robert M. Levin, MD *Robert M. Levin, MD.*
Health Officer

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

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 procedure mask (cloth masks not permitted) during the influenza season while working in patient care areas.

This year it is particularly important to receive a flu vaccination. COVID-19 infection causes a greater degree of illness and death in those with co-morbidities. It is highly likely that acquiring a COVID-19 infection while simultaneously suffering from an influenza infection will worsen the outcome of being infected with either one alone. Now, in light of the Delta variant and rising cases of COVID-19 in Ventura County, getting an annual flu vaccine is increasingly important.

Rationale

In the US, the influenza season begins the first week of September and ends the last week in May. In Ventura County our period of increased transmission has historically occurred in a 4 to 6 week period sometime between December and March. The period of increased transmission generally has a single peak or single wave and a single predominant influenza subtype (usually influenza A H1 or H3). The number of deaths from influenza is generally less than 10 per year. The pattern changed in 2017/18. The period of increased activity increased to 20 weeks duration, began 6 weeks earlier than usual (Oct 2017), there were two major peaks, and each of the peaks had a different predominant influenza subtype. A total of 49 influenza related deaths were seen by the end of the 2017/18 season. For the first time, influenza B caused a significant number of local influenza deaths, and there was increased risk of having influenza more than once in a season because an individual could become infected by each of the predominant strains.

Each of the seasons since 2017/18 including last year (2019/20), has exhibited multiple waves, seasons from 16 – 18 weeks in duration, and either different predominant strains for each wave, or co-dominant strains in an individual wave.

Reported influenza cases and deaths have decreased since 2017/18, though they remain higher in 19/20 than numbers prior with 13 deaths. EpiCenter shows influenza-like illness was 20% – 35% of ED admissions in 19/20. Increased duration of activity, increased cases and deaths, and increased risk of acquiring multiple influenza infections in a season, make it critical for HCWs to be vaccinated at record high levels. Vaccination prevents influenza infection, complications, and deaths, and will help reduce the impact on EDs during the anticipated increase of COVID-19 infections this Fall.

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 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.

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