

MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 30, 2023

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 
Health Officer

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

As 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 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). However, this pattern changed in the 2017/18.

Each of the seasons since 2017/18 including this year (2022/23), 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. This year we face the imminent potential of overburdening our health care infrastructure with a “triple-demic” Flu, RSV, and COVID this fall as businesses and activities have and are returning to normal, pre-COVID, levels.

During the 22/23 season Ventura County experienced exceptionally high case rates. EpiCenter shows influenza-like illness was 23% of ED admissions in 2022/23. 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%.

This year it is particularly important to receive a flu vaccination. A new XBB COVID-19 variant is on the rise as well as RSV infections. 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 or RSV infection while simultaneously suffering from an influenza infection will worsen the outcome of being infected with either one alone. As Ventura County returns to pre-COVID activities and increased interactions, we must implement effective mitigation strategies to prevent and minimize disease burden and impact; getting an annual flu vaccine is one of the most effective interventions.

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.

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