VUMC Influenza Vaccination Policy: Frequently Asked Questions

BACKGROUND

Vanderbilt University Medical Center leadership recently approved updates to the VUMC Immunization Policy for Faculty and Staff. The updates are intended to protect the health of all patients and their family members, coworkers, and the greater Vanderbilt community.

Per the new policy, all VUMC faculty and staff must receive an annual influenza vaccination or be exempted from vaccination by December 1. We know from past experience that the overwhelming majority of team members embrace the influenza vaccination requirement and become compliant. However, VUMC faculty or staff members who remain non-compliant with the policy requirements after December 1 may no longer be allowed to perform their normal responsibilities and may face disciplinary action.

The Medical Center’s leadership has reviewed current recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, along with best practices for employee vaccinations at other leading health systems, and we are committed to this decision. In addition, The American Nurses Association recently announced its support of mandatory influenza requirements for all health care personnel, and the National Patient Safety Foundation named influenza vaccination of all team members as a “must do” practice to ensure patient safety.

As healthcare professionals, our mission is to provide our patients with the safest and highest quality care possible, and these changes are an important step to ensuring the safety of our community.

COMPLIANCE & CONSEQUENCES FOR NON-COMPLIANCE

What are my options to become compliant with the new mandatory influenza vaccination requirement?

1. Receive an influenza vaccine(s) from VUMC Occupational Health (provided free of charge);
   2. If you received your influenza vaccine(s) from a source other than VUMC Occupational Health (e.g. from your doctor, local drug store, etc.):
      a. Click here to upload a signed note, receipt, vaccination card, etc. from the outside vaccinating entity stating that you received the influenza vaccine at that location; or
      b. Fax a signed note, receipt, vaccination card, etc. from the outside vaccinating entity stating that you received the influenza vaccine at that location to VUMC Occupational Health Clinic at 615-936-0966; OR
   3. Submit here by October 1 an immunization exemption request for a deeply held religious/spiritual belief, medical contraindication, or severe allergy to a component in the vaccine.

Please note that if you choose Option 2 above you must include documentation from the outside vaccinating entity. This is a different requirement than in the past when attestation was an accepted form of documentation.

What happens if I don’t get the vaccine?

Staff who fail to document influenza vaccination and who have not received a medical exemption or religious accommodation by December 1 will be placed on unpaid leave until they achieve compliance and will not be
eligible for pay raises in the next fiscal year. Staff will be able to return to work once compliance is documented or at the end of flu season, whichever is sooner.

Faculty, fellows, and house staff who fail to document influenza vaccination and who have not received a medical exemption or religious accommodation by December 1 will lose access to all VUMC systems, including VUMC email and StarPanel. Access will be restored once compliance is documented or at the end of flu season, whichever is sooner.

EXEMPTIONS

What about an individual who has medical or religious reasons for declining vaccination?
An exemption to the immunization policy may be requested for 2 reasons: 1) Certain medical reasons or severe allergy to a vaccine component; or 2) deeply held religious or spiritual belief. The Exemption Review Committee will evaluate all requests on a case-by-case basis – with representation from HR, General Counsel, Occupational Health, Infection Prevention, Allergy & Immunology, and Quality and Safety.

To apply for an exemption, please click here. All requests must be made by October 1. You will receive notification of the Committee decision on or near November 1.

I received an exemption last year. Do I have to submit the paperwork again this year?  
Yes. All personnel who have a medical or religious exemption must submit a new request. Individual beliefs and medical conditions may change over time, and because the composition and availability of influenza vaccines changes from year-to-year, certain allergies or concerns may no longer be relevant.

Does an allergy to eggs qualify for an exemption due to an allergy to a component in the flu vaccine?
Flu Blok is a new brand of flu vaccine created WITHOUT using chicken eggs. The egg free vaccine is available at the Occupational Health Clinic. If you have an egg allergy, you can still be vaccinated!

The Executive Influenza Exemption Committee did not approve my exemption request after review. How do I appeal this decision?  
VUMC is committed to the diversity and inclusiveness of our entire health care team, and we provide all employee exemption requests an opportunity for equitable review. If an exemption is not granted, an appeal may be submitted here within 7 days of the initial exemption denial notification. All appeal decisions are final.

Individuals who choose not to submit an appeal and individuals whose appeal is denied, are required to document compliance by December 1. Those who fail to do will be subject to consequences for non-compliance as outlined in the policy.

If my declination for medical or religious reasons is approved, will I still be able to work?  
Yes. During flu season, those with approved exemptions will have the ability to work by wearing a mask that covers the nose and mouth when in patient care areas (both procedural and diagnostic).

Do people that work in other (non-clinical) areas (i.e. informatics) have to wear masks if they receive an exemption? 
Individuals who receive an exemption must wear a mask that covers the nose and mouth when in patient care areas (both clinical and diagnostic).

What type of masks will staff be wearing?  
Routine surgical masks that cover the nose and mouth.

Will exempted employees be given a 6-month supply of masks?  
Masks are already available on all units and will continue to be available throughout influenza season.

How long will employees have to wear a mask/how long will flu season be?
Exempted employees are required to wear a mask once flu activity starts in Davidson County until it ends, which is usually 8-12 weeks. Exempted employees and their HD managers will be notified by email of the exact time frame once it is determined by the Department of Infection Prevention.

**Has there been scripting created or suggested for staff to use with patients if they are wearing a mask?**
Yes. The core message is that this is the right thing to do for our patients and for one another. VUMC wants to provide the safest environment possible for patients, employees and their families, and visitors to our facilities:

“I can’t take the flu vaccine, so I’m wearing the mask to protect you. Masks are among the best methods we have in preventing the spread of the virus through coughing, sneezing or touching. By wearing the mask, I’m doing my part in protecting you, your family, and my co-workers from catching the flu. If you have any concerns, I’m happy to listen to them.”

**SUPPORT FOR MANDATORY VACCINATION**

**Why do we mandate the influenza vaccine for our healthcare personnel (HCP)?**
Each year, approximately 250,000 are hospitalized and 36,000 people die due to influenza infection, making it the 6th leading cause of death among adults in the United States. Many of these deaths are preventable. Vaccination of HCP is associated with reduced risk of influenza illness, work absenteeism, antibiotic use, and medical visits for those HCPs. HCP influenza vaccination has also been associated with reducing patient morbidity in certain healthcare settings.

**How effective are influenza vaccines, especially since virus strains keep changing?**
The influenza vaccine is one of the most effective methods to prevent influenza. The effectiveness of the vaccine depends on a number of factors, including the accuracy of the match between vaccine strains and circulating strains and the age and health of the recipient. Influenza vaccine does not protect against other respiratory viral infections that occur during winter months. Public health officials have a good track record of predicting the three or four main flu strains that will cause the most illness during each influenza season. These strains usually change each year, which is why the vaccine is given annually. Even if you get the influenza from a strain of the virus that wasn’t included in the vaccine, having the vaccine can make your illness milder.

**Why can't Vanderbilt stick with what has always worked, namely staying at home if you have symptoms and doing a better job of hand hygiene to prevent transmission of influenza?**
HCP have frequent contacts with high-risk patients in many settings, including the elevators and cafeteria. They can serve as a vehicle to transmit influenza even when they don’t have symptoms. Up to 25% of HCP with influenza may have minimal or no symptoms, yet they can still transmit infection. Studies have found that HCP with influenza-like symptoms work an average of 2.5 days while ill, and those infected with influenza can transmit the virus to others even before their symptoms begin. Additionally, their absenteeism can stress a health care facility or system. Research shows that influenza vaccination of HCP may decrease patient mortality, the risk of nosocomial infection, and HCP absenteeism while limiting the risk of bringing illness acquired at work home to family members.

**Why can't vaccination be voluntary?**
Our highest priority must be to protect our patients, many of whom are exceptionally vulnerable to adverse outcomes from influenza. The research clearly shows that influenza vaccinations vastly increase mass immunity and protect immune-suppressed patients.

**What other institutions/health systems have mandated influenza vaccination for HCP?**
Institutions/health systems that have mandated influenza vaccination among HCP include, but are not limited to: Johns Hopkins University Hospitals, MedStar Health System, Virginia Mason Medical Center, University of Pennsylvania Hospital, University of Pittsburgh, Barnes-Jewish Hospital/Washington University, Baptist Hospital/Wake Forest University, Emory University, Creighton University, Loyola University Hospital (Chicago, Ill.), all hospitals in the HCA system, University of Mississippi, University of Arkansas, Ohio State University, University of Maryland Medical Center, University of Michigan, Duke University Health System, University of North Carolina Health Care, and Michigan State.
What professional associations support mandated influenza vaccination among HCP?
Organizations supporting HCP influenza vaccination mandates in healthcare settings include: The American Nurses Association (ANA), American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American College of Physicians (ACP), American Hospital Association (AHA), Tennessee Hospital Association, American Medical Directors Association (AMDA), American Pharmacists Association (APhA), American Public Health Association (APHA), Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, Inc. (APIC), Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), National Business Group on Health, National Founding for Infectious Diseases (NFID), National Patient Safety Foundation (NPSF), and Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA).

Is it legal to mandate influenza vaccination?
Yes. Fifteen states have legislation requiring that health care workers be immunized in certain circumstances. In fact, several health care systems in our area have already mandated influenza vaccination, including, but not limited to: St. Thomas Midtown (Baptist), St. Thomas Rutherford, St. Thomas West, TriStar Centennial Medical Center, TriStar Hendersonville Medical Center, TriStar Horizon Medical Center, TriStar Skyline Medical Center, TriStar Southern Hills Medical Center, TriStar Summit Medical Center, Williamson Medical Center, North Crest Medical Center, Franklin Wood Community Hospital, Indian Path Medical Center, Johnson City Medical Center, Marshall Medical Center, and Maury Regional Medical Center.

Is it a violation of HIPAA for my vaccination status to be shared with my supervisor/department chair?
No. A vaccine you receive at work or share with your employer for employment purposes is not protected health information under HIPAA.

IMPORTANCE OF BEING VACCINATED

I’m not involved in direct patient care. Why should I be vaccinated?
The CDC recommends the vaccine for all persons over the age of 6 months, especially HCP. Everyone, including faculty, laboratory, clerical, dietary and housekeeping employees as well as laundry, security, facilities, maintenance and administrative personnel, might be exposed to the influenza virus even though they are not directly involved in patient care and could transmit the virus to others.

I’m very healthy and never get influenza. Why should I get the influenza vaccine?
Working in a health care environment increases your risk of exposure. You may become infected and experience only mild symptoms but still pass the virus to patients, co-workers, and members of your family.

I’m very familiar with the symptoms of influenza, and I stay home when I am sick. So, there is very little chance that I would infect my co-workers or patients. Why should I get the vaccine?
The signs and symptoms of influenza may not appear for a day or two after you contract influenza, during which time you could unknowingly infect patients and co-workers.

Can’t I just take antiviral drugs if I get influenza?
It is best to take precautions to prevent influenza with annual immunization. You can always seek treatment for influenza, but in the meantime you may have already passed on the virus to patients and co-workers because viral shedding may occur up to two to three days prior to symptom initiation. Also, resistance to antiviral drugs can develop in circulating virus strains, therefore compromising the effectiveness of the drugs for people who need them the most—those at high risk for severe complications.

MANAGERS

Are nurse practitioners, faculty, physicians, etc. responsible for their own vaccine compliance? I.e., do unit managers have to monitor faculty members for compliance?
Unit managers are responsible for encouraging any non-compliant staff on their unit to become compliant. Department chairs are responsible for encouraging non-compliant faculty to become compliant. Managers and department chairs can monitor team member compliance by logging in to the VUMC Influenza Vaccination Compliance Report. You must have access to Tableau to view this report, and you must be on the Vanderbilt network (on campus or through a VPN). Access to view individual compliance status is limited to those with the Home Department Manager or PA HD Executor role in Privilege Management.

**How will managers be notified that an employee has been exempted?**
Individuals who receive an exemption will be notified by email that their exemption request was approved. HD Managers will be copied on this email. These notifications will be sent on or near November 1.

**How will other units know an employee is exempt (i.e. sister units/floaters)?**
Please see answer to question above. Access to view individual compliance status is limited to those with the Home Department Manager or PA HD Executor role in Privilege Management.

**How are students working in the medical center monitored?**
Students are monitored by the department in which they study and by contract with the school.

**How do we monitor vendors that come in and out of the hospital and be assured that they are vaccinated?**
We will begin this process by adding it to new contracts and communicating to vendors while we develop a more centralized process.

**Will an employee who goes on unpaid leave have the same job upon returning?**
Yes.

**How will we backfill positions of employees that go on unpaid leave?**
We expect these numbers to be very low, so consider the current options you have to fill positions when employees go out on leave for other reasons – for example, PRN, float pool, etc.

For more information about the VUMC Influenza Vaccination Program for Faculty and Staff, please visit Occupational Health’s Influenza Vaccine Program website. For educational material related to common myths about the flu shot, please visit Occupational Health’s Common Concerns about the Flu Vaccine website.

If you have a specific question not addressed in the FAQs, we want to hear from you. To submit a question about the new policy please click here. We will be sure to get back to you with an answer.

Back To Top