

Influenza Vaccination of Health Care Workers

Why should health care workers be vaccinated with influenza vaccine?

Influenza vaccination protects the health-care workers (HCW), the patients they serve and their community. Those health care workers not vaccinated are a key cause of influenza outbreaks in a health care setting. One study showed a high proportion of health-care workers who develop influenza-like illness continued to work, undoubtedly shedding viruses and exposing colleagues and patients. The reasons cited were they needed to perform important tasks, a sense of irreplaceability, a desire not to impose their work on colleagues and not being sick enough to stay home. Particularly for nurses, preserving sick time was an issue. CDC strongly encourages health-care employers to provide influenza vaccine to their workers to maximize vaccination rates. Annually, influenza vaccine coverage of health-care workers nation-wide is 40%.

What can health care employers do?

Employers in the health-care arena need to commit resources to institutionalize influenza vaccination in the workplace and demonstrate that immunizations are a priority for the employees and their patient's safety. Employers need to develop policies to promote educating the health-care worker about the benefits and safety of vaccination and the potential health complications associated with influenza illness to themselves, the patients they serve and the risk of exposing their family members.

Who will benefit?

Reducing the risk of an influenza outbreak in a health-care setting is the overall goal. This can occur within a facility. By increasing influenza vaccination coverage, a health-care facility would have a reduction in worker absenteeism, reduced medical visits and a reduction in prescribed anti-viral medications and antibiotic use for secondary infection. Additional benefits include a reduction in the cost of replacement workers and improved quality care for their patients.

Why are health care workers not getting vaccinated?

Reasons cited for not receiving influenza vaccine were strikingly similar across studies.

- Concern about side effects or vaccine safety, including the misperception that the injectable vaccine could cause the flu
- Perception of low personal risk of contracting influenza
- Inconvenience
- Ignorance of the CDC recommendations
- Dislike of needles

What strategies can be used to increase influenza rates in health care workers?

There are three interventions, increasing demand, enhancing access and reducing provider barriers. Changes need to be made in the attitudes and the behavior of the health-care worker. They need to be educated about the risk of influenza, the safety and benefits of vaccination and the rationale for CDC recommendations. They also need access to an immunization program that makes vaccination convenient and low cost or free of charge. Health Care Organization's need to recognize their role with the health-care worker and the importance of infection control practices and patient safety along with the financial advantages to an institution by preserving their health care capacity.

What strategies work to increase health care workers influenza vaccination rates?

- Select a leader to administer the influenza immunization program
- Get a commitment from top management, to include a budget allocation
- Create a policy statement affirming institutional commitment to increasing health-care worker influenza vaccination rates
- Use every possible means to deliver messages
- Provide education and reeducation especially addressing HCW concerns regarding influenza vaccination
- Make influenza vaccine easily accessible for all shifts, bring the vaccine to the employees on the floor
- Remove cost barriers to immunization
- Audit immunization programs and provide feedback to key personnel
- Repeat the influenza immunization program annually

Prevention and Control of Influenza: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). MMWR. 2005; Jul 29: 1-40
Schaffner W, Cox N, Lundstrom T, Nichol K, Novick L, Siegel J. Improving Influenza Vaccination Rates in Health Care Workers: Strategies to Increase Protection for Worker and Patients. National Foundation for Infectious Diseases