



**Health Officer Influenza Vaccination and Masking Order  
Residential Care Facilities for the Elderly  
Frequently Asked Questions**

**Why is the influenza vaccination and masking order needed?**

Influenza is a serious contagious disease of the lungs that can be spread through sneezing, coughing, and talking. People can spread influenza to others before they feel ill. Vaccination is the best way to prevent getting influenza. We encourage everyone over six months of age to get influenza vaccine each year.

Over the years, many residential care facilities for the elderly in Contra Costa County have experienced influenza outbreaks, some resulting in the hospitalization and death of their residents.

Anyone can catch the flu but the elderly are especially vulnerable to severe influenza disease, complications, and even death. Many of our elderly community members know this and are likely to get vaccinated each year.

In spite of this, even facilities with high rates of vaccination among residents are vulnerable to influenza when staff members are not vaccinated. Influenza vaccine tends to be more effective in younger, healthier people. Vaccinating staff not only protects your workforce during flu season but prevents influenza from being introduced into a facility, protecting residents and avoiding disruption to a facility's day-to-day activities.

**Which facilities are affected by the influenza vaccination and masking order?**

The vaccination and masking order applies to all residential care facilities for the elderly (sometimes called an assisted living facility or "ALF," retirement home, or board and care home).

The Community Care Licensing Division, California Department of Social Services, licenses California residential care facilities for the elderly: <https://secure.dss.ca.gov/CareFacilitySearch/>

In 2012, Dr. Walker, the Contra Costa County Health Officer, issued an influenza vaccination/masking order for all licensed health care facilities in Contra Costa County. This order was updated in 2017 to define the flu season as November 1<sup>st</sup> through April 30<sup>th</sup>.

**Who is considered a staff member of a residential care facility for the elderly?**

For the purposes of this order, a staff member is defined as a person, paid or unpaid, working in a licensed residential care for the elderly facility who has direct contact with residents or who works in resident areas.

**When is influenza season?**

Influenza season is defined as the period of November 1<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup> of the following year. The Health Officer may extend the mandatory masking period if surveillance data demonstrate an unusually late peak and continued widespread influenza activity in the spring.

**Where can staff get vaccinated?**

Staff members needing flu vaccine should check with their regular doctor/provider. Kaiser members can call the Kaiser Flu Hotline (1-800-573-5811). Flu vaccine is also available at many pharmacies and grocery stores. Weekly public health immunization clinics provide flu vaccine at reduced/no cost. Nearby flu vaccine providers can be found here: [flushot.healthmap.org](http://flushot.healthmap.org). For more information on where to get flu vaccine, please visit: <http://cchealth.org/flu/vaccination.php>

**Can the flu vaccine cause flu disease?**

The flu vaccine cannot cause flu disease. The most common side effects: a sore arm, a low fever, or aches, are mild and go away on their own. It can take up to two weeks for protection to develop after getting the vaccine. It is recommended to get flu vaccine as soon as possible to provide protection throughout the flu season. There are also other germs during the winter that can cause flu-like symptoms. Covering coughs and sneezes and staying home when sick can help prevent spreading germs.

Some people mistake influenza with norovirus, sometimes called “stomach flu.” Norovirus can cause one to two days of vomiting and/or diarrhea. Norovirus is not the same illness as influenza, although both can be common during the winter months. There is no vaccine at this time for norovirus.

Both influenza and norovirus can spread quickly in a residential facility. If you suspect that your facility is experiencing influenza or norovirus illness among residents or staff, please contact Contra Costa Public Health (925) 313-6740 right away for assistance.

**What kind of mask should be used? When should masks be changed, replaced, or discarded?**

Please check with your facility about specific details of the implementation of this order including when masks should be changed or discarded. Other facilities subject to this order have used surgical masks (see image of an example below). This mask covers the nose and mouth and will help contain droplets produced when a staff member speaks, sneezes, or coughs. Masks should be replaced when soiled, wet, or damaged.



**Can staff decline influenza vaccination for any reason?**

Staff that decline influenza vaccine must wear a mask during influenza season while working in a residential care facility for the elderly.

**What about staff who have egg allergy?**

People who are allergic to eggs may not be allergic to influenza vaccine and many people with egg allergy can safely receive flu vaccine. People who only get hives after exposure to eggs can get any flu vaccine that is available. Staff members with an egg allergy that leads to reactions other than hives should check with their doctor/provider about flu vaccine.

**Should a staff member who is immunocompromised or has a chronic health condition (asthma, diabetes, etc.) receive influenza vaccine?**

Flu vaccine is highly recommended for people with these conditions because they are at greater risk of severe influenza illness and complications. Staff members belonging to these groups should check with their doctor/provider about flu vaccine.

**Should a staff member who is pregnant receive influenza vaccine?**

The influenza shot can and should be given to pregnant women. It is safe to receive flu vaccine during any trimester. Pregnant women and their newborn can benefit from influenza vaccination as both are at greater risk of severe influenza illness and complications. Women who receive influenza vaccine during pregnancy can pass protection to their newborn. This is important because children under six months of age are too young to be vaccinated for influenza. By California law, pregnant women should receive preservative-free influenza vaccine available as prefilled syringes and single dose vials.

**What kind of flu vaccine can staff receive?**

There are different kinds of flu vaccines available. All flu vaccines provide similar protection for adults against the three or four most common flu strains. Most flu vaccine is available as a shot but some is also available as a nasal spray. However, for the 2017-2018 flu season, nasal spray vaccine is not recommended. Staff members should check with their doctor if they are unsure which flu vaccine to receive.

More information about the flu shot is available here: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/flu.html>

**Is there a preference for trivalent or quadrivalent flu vaccine?**

Historically, flu vaccine contains three strains (trivalent). In recent seasons, influenza vaccine containing four flu strains (quadrivalent) has been made available. There is currently no preference for any given flu vaccine over another.

**Are there resources available online?**

Resources are available on our website (<http://cchealth.org/flu/>) including the Health Officer vaccination/masking order memo, places to get flu vaccine, and other resources you may find helpful. A customizable template poster explaining why some staff may be masked is available for downloading here: <http://cchealth.org/flu/pdf/Template-Flu-Mask-Poster.doc>.

**Does this Health Officer order also apply to facility visitors?**

The Health Officer vaccination/masking order only applies to staff members working in a residential care facility for the elderly. However, doctors recommend everyone 6 months and older to get a flu vaccine every year. Facilities wanting to protect residents and staff from influenza should encourage flu vaccination of all visitors and family members. Additional information about flu disease and flu vaccine, including posters and fact sheets are available at [cchealth.org/flu](http://cchealth.org/flu).

**Do other places have similar influenza vaccination/masking policies?**

Many counties, including Contra Costa County, have Health Officer orders requiring licensed health care facilities such as hospitals and skilled nursing facilities to implement a vaccination/masking program for staff who work with patients or in patient care areas.

For some employers, annual influenza vaccination is a condition of employment. The Immunization Action Coalition's Honor Roll lists organizations around the United States with influenza vaccination requirements: <http://www.immunize.org/honor-roll/influenza-mandates/honorees.asp>