

Do No Harm – Why Healthcare Workers Need Flu Vaccines

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urrent statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that healthcare ranks among the nation's largest industries providing more than 14 million jobs. While the jobs range from clerical to clinical, one thing is certain: Most people who pursue healthcare careers do so because they want to help people. Even those who are not physicians share the core values of the Hippocratic Oath: Do no harm.

Unfortunately, not all healthcare workers live up to that promise when it comes to getting an annual flu vaccine. According to recent surveys, nearly 60 percent of American healthcare workers fail to get annual flu shots. That's despite recommendations from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), and the Healthcare Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee (HICPAC) recommend that all U.S. health care workers get vaccinated annually against influenza.

A look at previous flu seasons.

During the 2010-2011 influenza season, coverage for influenza vaccination among healthcare workers was estimated at 63.5 percent. Interestingly, coverage was 98 percent among healthcare workers who had an employer requirement for vaccination. In the absence of requirements, increased vaccination coverage was associated with employers offering vaccination onsite, free of charge, for multiple days. Here are some other "flu facts":

- Influenza (the flu) can lead to hospitalization and sometimes even death. Anyone can get sick from the flu.
- You can get the flu from anyone who is infected, including patients and coworkers who are sick with the flu.
- If you get the flu, you can easily spread it to others even if you don't feel sick.
- By getting vaccinated, you can help protect yourself, your family, and the patients you interact with from getting the flu.

Research supports the benefits of flu vaccines.

In an article supporting the benefits of flu vaccines for

healthcare workers, the CDC website states that those in healthcare professions who get vaccinated help to reduce transmission of influenza; staff illness and absenteeism; and influenza-related illness and death, especially among people at increased risk for severe influenza illness. The article goes on to say that higher vaccination levels among healthcare staff have been associated with a lower risk of nosocomial (hospital-acquired) influenza cases.

No flu shot, no job?

A new federal working group, Healthcare-Associated Infections (HAIs) Increasing Influenza Vaccination Coverage Among Health Care Personnel, has recommended that hospitals around the country implement a program to increase flu immunization rates to 90 percent by 2020, by mandating flu shots as a requirement of employment.¹ While an ultimatum to get a flu vaccine may seem extreme to some, consider the following:

- Influenza outbreaks in hospitals and long-term care facilities have been attributed to low influenza vaccination coverage among healthcare workers in those facilities.
- Higher influenza vaccination levels among health care workers can reduce influenza-related illness, and even deaths, especially in settings like nursing homes.

Workers may be vaccine resistant – not flu resistant.

A Washington Post article from November 2008 speculates that one reason healthcare workers skip the flu vaccine is that many falsely believe they are personally "flu resistant." Unfortunately, working around people who are ill does not make you immune to the flu. Even a healthy person who is asymptomatic could still be contagious and infect patients who are presumably less healthy to begin with. A little known fact is that a person who has acquired the influenza virus is contagious for nearly a week, starting a day before any symptoms appear. Which means it is possible to spread the flu over the course of an entire working day before you even know you are sick. ➤



Setting a good example.

Healthcare workers interact regularly with patients, including many who are at high risk for suffering severe complications from the flu, including children with compromised immune systems, pregnant women, or seniors over the age of 65. By making the responsible decision to get vaccinated, those working in healthcare can protect themselves and lower the odds of inadvertently passing the flu to patients.

A few years ago, the CDC instituted Healthcare Worker Vaccination Day. The campaign encouraged hospitals, clinics and nursing homes to take vigorous steps to prioritize vaccination of healthcare workers, with suggestions such as conducting in-house vaccination clinics for staff and developing incentive programs to encourage vaccination.

Healthcare workers should get vaccinated because it sets a good example for patients, minimizes the chances they will come down with the flu and have to stay home from work during a season when they are needed most. Do no harm; get your annual flu vaccine.

¹ <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/initiatives/hai/hcpflu.html>