

MANAGING FLU SEASON DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Although COVID-19 has commanded near-universal attention over the last year, influenza remains a serious health concern. Last year, flu viruses infected 35 million people, leading to more than 400,000 hospitalizations and 22,000 deaths. In 2017-2018, the worst flu season on record, the flu sent 800,000 people to the hospital and led to 60,000 deaths.

Since experts can't predict the virulence of a given flu season, the most effective way to prevent hospitalizations and serious illness is vaccination. Data

collected across more than a decade shows that even when immunization cannot prevent symptoms altogether, it significantly reduces the impact of the virus. Following best practices for hygiene, social distancing, and respiratory etiquette can further help to prevent illness.

As COVID-19 continues to spread, keeping your employees healthy this flu season requires a plan for both vaccination and behavioral guidelines in the workplace. Here's what you need to know.



PREPARING FOR A **DOUBLE THREAT**

Without adequate preparation, the threat of flu coinciding with COVID-19 can have serious consequences for individuals, companies and communities. As infections spike, hospitals face the possibility of becoming overwhelmed. Individuals, meanwhile, risk contracting a second infection while seeking medical care for the first. Fortunately, through flu vaccinations, social distancing and proper hygiene, employers can lessen the impact of the “double threat” posed by COVID-19 and influenza and avoid the most dangerous consequences.



KEEPING WORKERS **HEALTHY**

STOP THE SPREAD

Immunization is the most effective way to prevent the flu from spreading in a workplace. Even in cases where it does not prevent illness entirely, research has proven that vaccination saves lives, reduces hospitalizations, and limits the spread of infection. Axiom Medical's mobile labs make it easy to keep employees healthy by bringing flu shots directly to the workplace, reducing the risk of flu and COVID-19 exposure at clinics or pharmacies.

GENERAL WELLNESS GUIDELINES

Beyond vaccinations, hygiene guidelines can help individuals reduce their chances of catching the flu. As a respiratory illness, influenza spreads similarly to COVID-19. Transmission typically takes place through droplets in the air up to about 6 feet away. Less commonly, a person can become infected by touching a surface with virus particles, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

Because of their similarities, day-to-day measures that prevent the spread of COVID-19 can also prevent flu. These include:

1. Ensuring employees stay 6 feet or more from one another
2. Enforcing respiratory etiquette
3. Requiring face coverings whenever possible
4. Encouraging frequent hand-washing
5. Frequently sanitizing surfaces
6. Isolating employees at the first sign of symptoms



In previous years, the CDC advised that persons with flu symptoms isolate for 4-5 days. However, since early flu symptoms often mirror those of COVID-19, anyone feeling ill should isolate for at least 10 days, the recommended quarantine period for COVID-19. Some employees may need to isolate for longer. Our team can help you determine the appropriate isolation period for a given employee. The table below outlines common symptoms of the flu and COVID-19:

FLU	COVID-19	BOTH
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More likely than COVID to have runny nose or congested sinuses• Ear infections (primarily in children)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anosmia (loss of sense of smell)• Swelling and discoloration of toes (so-called “COVID toes”)• Serious breathing difficulty• Low oxygen (with or without breathing difficulty)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fever• Chills• Cough• Shortness of breath• Extreme fatigue• Sore throat• Body aches• Headache

GUIDELINES BY INDUSTRY

As with COVID-19, the risk of flu transmission varies by industry. Using OSHA's classifications of workplace exposure risk to COVID-19, the following guidelines help to protect against both COVID-19 and the flu.



LOW RISK

Environment: Workers have minimal contact with others

Examples: Traditional office jobs

Guidelines: Allow employees to work remotely when possible. Stagger schedules of those who must work on-site and implement social distancing. Follow hygiene protocols, including frequent handwashing and mask wearing.



MEDIUM RISK

Environment: Employees must come into contact with the general public

Examples: Retail workers, restaurant servers, school teachers

Guidelines: Require face coverings and implement social distancing. When possible, install physical barriers, such as plastic sneeze guards. In service environments, consider training employees on how to confidently ask customers to wear face coverings.



HIGH RISK

Environment: Employees are likely to come into contact with people suspected to have flu or COVID-19.

Examples: Medical facilities, COVID-19 testing sites

Guidelines: Make flu vaccination a top priority. Consult a workplace medical expert to determine how to effectively implement CDC guidelines.



SPECIAL CASES

Some workplaces, such as agricultural plants and film studios, present an elevated risk because of prolonged contact between employees, unavoidable interactions without PPE, or other situations that can lead to illness. These circumstances require industry-specific plans. Axiom has advised movie studios, meat packing plants, and similar industries on effective protocols to prevent the spread of infectious illness without interrupting business. If you face elevated risk in your industry, contact us for an individualized plan.

SAFELY VACCINATING YOUR EMPLOYEES

On-site immunizations are the safest way for employees to get the flu vaccine. Our mobile clinics give you this option. If you cannot provide vaccinations at your workplace, encourage employees to get vaccinated through their primary care doctor or local pharmacy. Any pharmacy following CDC guidelines can be considered safe for workers to get their vaccine.



FLU SHOT FAQ

Despite the benefits of flu vaccination, misconceptions lead to needless hospitalizations and deaths every year. Below, we answer frequently asked questions about vaccines and dispel common myths.

Can you get the flu from a vaccine?

No. That “under the weather” feeling many people get after a flu shot is actually the body’s immune response reacting to the vaccine. Notably, vaccinated people can still get sick, but not from the vaccination.

Why encourage the vaccine if employees can still get sick?

The flu shot significantly reduces the severity of illness, preventing hospitalizations and deaths while shortening the time that employees feel sick. Vaccinations also decrease the spread of illness, ensuring workers are less likely to infect family and colleagues. To put the impact in perspective, the CDC revealed that in the historically severe 2017-2018 season, vaccines prevented 7.1 million illnesses, 109,000 hospitalizations, and 8000 deaths.

I hear there are different flu strains. How do I know my employees are getting immunized against the right one?

Most shots protect against four different strains of the virus based on what research indicates will be the most common for that season.

My employees all got flu vaccines last year. Are they still protected?

No. The flu vaccine is seasonal, and everyone needs an annual booster.

What if an employee contracts COVID-19 or comes into contact with someone who has?

In any case of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 exposure, flu vaccination should be postponed until after the isolation period, regardless of symptoms. This is to protect healthcare workers.

What if an employee misses the recommended vaccination period?

It’s never too late to get vaccinated. Although the CDC recommends getting the vaccine before November, a later vaccine still provides protection through the rest of the flu season.

How can I make sure all workers get vaccinated?

Make the process easy. If possible, offer flu shots on-site. If your employees work remotely or in the field, allow them time to get vaccinated during the workday. The benefits of preventing the flu are worth the effort.

Offer hassle-free flu shots with Axiom Medical’s mobile lab, offered through our OnSite Health Services. Contact us to learn more. (281) 465-7100 | axiomllc.com

REFERENCES

<https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3993.pdf> | <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf> | <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/season/faq-flu-season-2020-2021.htm> | <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/spotlights/2017-2018/vaccine-reduces-risk-severe-illness.htm> | <https://www.contagionlive.com/news/influenza-vaccination-prevented-8000-deaths-in-2017-2018-flu-season-study-reports> | <https://www.aad.org/public/diseases/coronavirus/covid-toes>