

## **Questions about Universal Influenza Vaccination:**

### **What does Universal Influenza Vaccination Mean?**

Universal influenza vaccination means that all health care personnel working in St. Luke's University Health Network (SLUHN) must be immunized against influenza (i.e. the "flu") on an annual basis. Healthcare personnel are defined as all SLUHN employees, residents, students, members of the medical staff, volunteers, observers, contracted personnel, and outside vendors who provide or have the potential to provide on-site support at any Network facility. Influenza vaccination is a condition of employment and continued association with SLUHN.

### **Why is SLUHN mandating the flu vaccine?**

Each year, approximately 36,000 people die and 226,000 are hospitalized due to the flu. Influenza vaccination is the most effective way to prevent influenza infection. As healthcare workers it is our professional and ethical responsibility to protect the health of ourselves, our patients, our visitors, our colleagues, and our own families. Requiring an annual flu vaccine demonstrates our commitment at SLUHN to this important safety measure.

### **I'm very healthy and never get the flu. Why do I need to get the flu vaccine?**

Influenza can affect anyone, which we all saw first hand at SLUHN this past season. We cared for several young, healthy people who were critically ill from the flu, some of who did not survive. Working in a health care environment increases your risk of exposure. Furthermore, individuals with influenza are capable of spreading their infection for up to 48 hours prior to the onset of actual flu-like symptoms. This means that it is possible for you to catch the flu from seemingly healthy patients and co-workers who have not yet developed symptoms.

### **I'm very familiar with the symptoms of the flu, and I stay home when I am sick. So, there is very little chance that I would infect my co-workers or patients. Why do I need to get the vaccine?**

The signs and symptoms of the flu may not appear until 24-48 hours after you contract influenza, during which time you could spread the infection to patients and co-workers before you even realize you are sick.

### **Is it legal to mandate flu vaccination?**

Yes. Several states already have legislation requiring that health care workers be immunized in certain circumstances. Many states also require proof of immunity for other communicable diseases such as measles, mumps and rubella for health care workers. Additionally, other health care systems in our area have also been mandating flu vaccination for several years, including Lehigh Valley Health Network, Easton Hospital, Sacred Heart, Coordinated Health, Good Shepherd, Grand View, Abington, Main Line Health, St. Christopher's, CHOP, and University of Pennsylvania Health System.

### **Questions about SLUHN policy:**

#### **Who is required to get vaccinated?**

Influenza vaccination is required of all SLUHN healthcare personnel. Healthcare personnel are defined as all employees, residents, students, members of the medical staff, volunteers, observers, contracted personnel, and outside vendors who provide or have the potential to provide on-site support at any SLUHN facility between October 1 and March 31 of the following year. A SLUHN facility is defined as any campus or location owned, leased, or controlled by SLUHN or at which SLUHN patients are located, including patient homes.

#### **I don't work directly with patients. Do I still need to get the flu shot?**

Yes. While some of the individuals working at SLUHN may not directly care for patients, they have jobs that put them in close contact with patients, the patient environment, or health care personnel who do care for patients. Additionally, all individuals serve important roles in their respective departments, and if they were unable to work due to illness from influenza, it could negatively impact our Network's overall ability to provide quality patient care. Therefore, in order to provide the best protection of all of our health care personnel and patients, it's important to make sure everyone is immunized.

#### **How will the universal influenza vaccination program work?**

All health care personnel will be required to be immunized against influenza annually unless a specific medical or religious exemption is requested and approved by SLUHN. Those seeking exemptions must apply for them by August 30. Vaccinations will begin in October. All individuals must be

vaccinated or granted an exemption by November 15. Vaccinations for new personnel will be available through March 31, based on availability.

**What if I become newly-hired or associated with SLUHN during the flu season?**

Individuals who start employment or association with SLUHN during the annual influenza vaccination campaign or influenza season must be vaccinated or granted an exemption within thirty (30) days of commencing service at any Network facility. Vaccinations for new personnel will be available through March 31, based on availability.

**Do I have to pay for my own vaccine?**

SLUHN will provide influenza vaccinations free of charge to all Network employees, residents, students, members of the medical staff, volunteers, and observers.

**What if I get my vaccine elsewhere?**

If you obtain your flu vaccine from your physician, another health care facility, or other vaccination service available in the community, you must provide proof of immunization to SLUHN on an annual basis. Acceptable forms of proof of influenza vaccination include a physician's note, a receipt listing influenza vaccination, or a copy of a signed consent form. Any proof of immunization must contain the individual's name and date of vaccination.

**What if I have a medical or religious reason that prevents me from getting vaccinated?**

SLUHN will consider requests for exemption to annual influenza vaccination for qualifying medical reasons or sincerely held religious beliefs. Standard criteria for medical exemption will be established based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

**What are examples of medical reasons for which I might be considered exempt from receiving the flu vaccine?**

Examples of qualifying medical reasons include severe allergic reactions to eggs (see below), previous severe allergic reaction to the influenza vaccine or component of the vaccine, or a history of Guillain-Barre syndrome within six (6) weeks of receiving a previous vaccine. You should see your doctor if there is a question about your ability to receive the vaccine.

## **Can I receive the flu vaccine if I have an egg allergy?**

People who have ever had a severe allergic reaction to eggs (i.e. hives, swelling of the lips or tongue, or difficulty breathing) may be advised not to get vaccinated. People who have had a mild reaction to egg (i.e. mild gastrointestinal symptoms) may receive a flu shot with additional precautions. People who can tolerate eating food prepared with eggs, such as baked goods, can generally tolerate the influenza vaccine. Most, but not all, types of flu vaccine contain small amounts of egg. If you have an egg allergy, you should see your doctor to discuss whether it is safe to receive the vaccine.

## **How do I request a medical exemption?**

An individual requesting medical exemption must submit the following **by August 30**:

- a) Influenza Vaccination Acknowledgement and Exemption Form Request, AND
- b) Request of Medical Exemption from Influenza Vaccination Form that is completed by his/her private physician who attests to the medical contraindication.  
(see intranet site for forms)

All requests for medical exemptions will be evaluated by Employee Health Services in consultation with the Department of Infection Control and Prevention, the Infection Control Committee, and the Chief of Infectious Diseases as needed. Individuals will be notified in writing as to whether his/her request for medical exemption has been granted.

## **How do I request a religious exemption?**

An individual requesting exemption must submit the following **by August 30**:

- a) Influenza Vaccination Acknowledgement and Exemption Form Request, AND
- b) Request for Religious Exemption From Influenza Vaccination Form that is completed by his/her clergy, AND
- c) Documentation on letterhead stationary that supports the exemption.  
(see intranet site for forms)

All requests for religious exemptions will be evaluated by Human Resources in consultation with Pastoral Care Services as needed. Individuals will be notified in writing as to whether his/her request for religious exemption has been granted.

**If my declination for medical or religious reasons is approved, will I still be able to work?**

Yes. Health care personnel who work while unvaccinated for influenza and the influenza virus is active in the community, will be required to wear approved respiratory protection when in  $\leq 6$  foot proximity of an area where a patient or other health care personnel may be encountered at any SLUHN facility. This applies regardless of the location of the patient or health care personnel, the extent of interaction, or whether a patient or health care personnel are currently present. Such areas include but are not limited to clinical units, hallways, lobbies, break rooms, and cafeterias except when actually eating. Other infection prevention measures may also be required including reassignment of unvaccinated personnel who work in identified high risk areas.

**What happens if I don't get my flu shot and don't have an approved exemption?**

All health care personnel who are not vaccinated or granted an exemption by November 15 will receive a written warning. They will be allowed up to two weeks from the date of receipt of this written warning to comply with the policy. Failure to comply with any warning or notice of non-compliance will result in corrective action, up to and including termination of employment, loss of clinical privileges at SLUHN, and loss of contracts or access to SLUHN facilities, as applicable.

**Where do I submit my forms?**

All documentation related to proof of vaccination as well as medical and religious exemption requests will be submitted as follows:

Individual

Network Employees  
Medical Staff not employed by SLUHN  
Residents and Medical Students  
Allied Health Students  
Nursing Students  
Volunteers  
Observers

Submit Forms to

Employee Health Services  
Department of Medical Affairs  
Medical Education Office  
Volunteer Services  
Educational Services  
Volunteer Services  
Department Manager

Contracted personnel  
Outside Vendors

Vendor Mate/HR  
Vendor Mate

### **Questions about the influenza vaccine:**

#### **Is the vaccine safe?**

Yes, flu vaccines are safe. Serious problems from the flu vaccine are very rare. Over the last 50 years, seasonal flu vaccines have had very good safety track records. Over the years, hundreds of millions of Americans have received seasonal flu vaccines. The most common side effect that a person is likely to experience is either soreness where the injection was given or runny nose in the case of nasal spray. These side effects are generally mild and usually go away after a day or two. More information about flu vaccine safety can be found at:

**<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/vaccine/vaccinesafety.htm>**

#### **Is the flu vaccine effective?**

Yes, the flu vaccine is the most effective method we have to prevent influenza. The effectiveness of the vaccine depends on a number of factors, including the match between vaccine strains and circulating strains, and the age and health of the recipient. Public health officials have a good track record of predicting the three main flu strains that will cause the most illness during each flu season. Even if you get the flu from a strain of the virus that wasn't included in the vaccine, having the vaccine can make your illness milder.

#### **Is it true that you can get the flu from the flu vaccine?**

No, you cannot get the flu from the flu vaccine. The viruses in the vaccine are either killed (as is the case with the shot) or weakened (as is the case with the nasal spray) so that they cannot cause the flu. Some people mistakenly confuse flu symptoms with the vaccine side effects, such as soreness, redness or swelling where the shot was given, low-grade fever and aches, and runny nose, sore throat, cough and headache (nasal mist only). These symptoms are usually mild and last only a few days.

#### **I'm pregnant. Is it safe to get the shot?**

Yes. In fact, pregnant women should receive the flu shot. Pregnant women are more likely to have serious complications for themselves and their pregnancy if they get the flu. You can receive the flu shot at any time,

during any trimester, while you are pregnant. If you have any concerns about receiving the flu vaccine while pregnant, you should contact your obstetrician.