Vaccinate-or-Mask Policy Learners Q&A:

Why did we decide to implement a vaccinate-or-mask policy?
We are implementing this policy for the health and safety of our patients and staff. Since 2012, Toronto Public Health and the infection control experts have been urging GTA hospitals to implement a policy to ensure our patients are as safe as possible from getting influenza at the hospital.

What other hospitals are going to a vaccinate-or-mask policy?
Many of the states in the USA have already implemented this type of policy years ago. British Columbia implemented this about three years ago and several other Canadian provinces are moving toward this policy as well. Last year approximately thirteen other Ontario hospitals moved ahead and implemented this policy.

Who is accountable for enforcing the policy?
This is no different than other hospital policies; we all are accountable to adhere to hospital directives and policies. Leaders will be asked to be diligent to ensure the policy is adhered to, but you may be asked by senior leadership, patients or family members if you are compliant with either obtaining the flu shot or wearing a mask during the delivery of patient care.

The vaccine is only 60% effective. Why put the policy in place now?
Our primary goal is to protect our patients as much as we can from getting influenza at the hospital. Being unvaccinated is 0% effective. The available evidence demonstrates that vaccination reduces the risk of transmission in the hospital substantially. There is also data supporting mask use. Evidence shows that even if you get influenza after a vaccination, the illness will likely be less severe.

What if I refuse to be either vaccinated or wear a mask?
We know our staff, students and volunteers are committed to the safety and well-being of the patients in our care and each other. This policy provides the option of either being vaccinated or wearing a mask where required during flu season. A commitment to abide by all hospital policies is agreed to when anyone joins North York General Hospital. Failure to follow any policy would be subject to disciplinary action including refusal to access patient care areas.

Where can I get the Influenza vaccine?
- Outpatient Pharmacy at the General site (ground floor)
  Monday to Friday: 8:30am to 7pm
  Saturday to Sunday: 9am to 5 pm
- Outpatient Pharmacy at Branson Ambulatory Care Centre (1st floor)
  Every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday: 9am to 4:30pm (closed between 11:30am to 12pm)
- In the community where flu vaccines are provided

How do I prove I got my flu shot?
There are two ways to prove you got the flu shot:
a. Have the verification sticker on your hospital ID badge which is available if you get your flu shot at the hospital.
b. Carry a vaccination card or written documentation to provide evidence of compliance with the policy, if asked.

What if I got my shot outside of the hospital? How do I properly document and prove it?
If you get your flu shot outside of the hospital, please ask your physician, pharmacist or nurse to provide you with a written document to validate you received the vaccination. If you received your vaccine at a TAHSN organization, provide the Centre for Education with the completed vaccination card or other written documentation so we can provide you with a flu vaccination sticker which we will put on your NYGH ID.
**Where do I have to wear a mask?**

All individuals covered by the policy must be vaccinated annually against influenza or wear a procedure mask during influenza season **in areas where patients are present and patient care is delivered**. The following areas are included:

- All inpatient and patient care areas, even if you are not providing care. Areas can include:
  - Patient rooms
  - Unit bathrooms
  - Nursing stations
  - Meeting rooms used for patient/family consults
  - Clinical unit hallways, as patients are likely to be present
- All outpatient and ambulatory clinics
- All patient waiting and holding areas
- Service elevators
- Patient transport hallways with access to procedure areas
- When accompanying a patient in an ambulance
- Patient registration offices
- Security desk in the Emergency Department
- Information desks in the Emergency Department

You do not need to wear a mask if you are in common areas or areas where patient care is not provided. Areas you do not need to wear a mask can include: café, lobby, staff lounges and administrative offices in non-clinical areas.

**When do I have to start wearing a mask?**

We will implement the policy at the beginning of flu season; this will be in consultation with the TAHSN hospitals and Toronto Public Health. Basically when we start to see influenza activity in the community or outbreaks in hospitals or long term care homes. This is anticipated to start towards end of November or early December. Wearing a mask will continue until the end of flu season, anticipated to be towards the end of March.

**What kind of mask should I be wearing?**

A surgical or procedure mask is required.

I feel embarrassed about wearing a mask in front of our patients. They will think I do not care about their safety?

We will be educating our patients and families that staff, students and volunteers do have a choice, and explain why some people may choose to wear a mask rather than have the influenza vaccine and that some staff may have true contraindications to receiving influenza vaccine.

**Once I receive the influenza vaccine, do I have to wear a mask for the next two weeks until it becomes effective?**

No mask will be required if the Vaccination Required Period has not been initiated, but once the vaccine required date is set, if you receive your vaccination after that date, yes you will be required to wear the mask for the next two weeks.

**I do not want to wear a sticker on my ID badge to identify if I have received the vaccine or not? What do I do?**

You can place the sticker on the backside of your ID badge (nametag) instead of the front side. This will provide you easy verification when questioned or audited if you have received the influenza vaccination. You could also use the card that will be provided to you at the time you are vaccinated, that is also sufficient. The problem with using the card is that you must have it on your person at all times.

**What will happen to me if I accidently forget to put a mask on or fail to understand where and when a mask should be worn?**

In the beginning it is understandable since we are introducing a new practice, innocent mistakes can happen. Hopefully you will self-regulate and catch yourself before others question you, but during the first year, staff will receive a reminder or be educated to the policy. Basically, you are to wear a mask in areas where patients are present and care is being delivered.
What if I get my flu shot, but get a cold or the flu, will I be required to also wear a mask when I return to work?
You will be asked to follow the normal surveillance protocol for our hospital, which is set by the Infection Prevention and Control and Occupational Health & Safety Departments.

When will I know that my mask is not being effective? I normally do not wear a mask in my role and I am not sure of mask protocol.
When the mask becomes wet, soiled, torn or dislodged, it will not be effective and should be removed, discarded and replaced. Hands should be cleaned on removal of the mask before putting on the replacement mask. The mask should also be removed and discarded when leaving the patient care area, (e.g., during breaks) and you should put on a new mask when you return to the unit.

How do I respond if someone asks me why I am wearing a mask?
Here are some key messages you can use when asked about wearing a mask during flu season:

- “Your safety and wellness is my priority, so during flu season I’ve decided to wear a mask even when I’m feeling well.”

- “If you have any questions about flu season, you can either visit our pharmacy, where you can get the flu shot or go to the hospital’s website (nygh.on.ca) for more information.”

Is there evidence to show that wearing a mask is effective at preventing transmission of influenza virus?
Yes, masks can be worn for one of two reasons: by infected people to prevent virus from being spread to others, and by people who are not infected to protect themselves. There are studies that demonstrate that when people with influenza wear a mask, the amount of influenza virus shed into the air around them when they breathe or cough is significantly reduced. (1,2)
There are also studies, which show that people who both wear masks and perform hand hygiene frequently are less likely to develop influenza when they are in close contact with people with influenza. (3 to 5)

References