

Preventing the spread of influenza

A patient and visitor guide

You can help prevent the spread of influenza. If you are feeling unwell, please do not enter our facilities. Get your influenza vaccination. Know your responsibilities. If you are not vaccinated you must wear a mask when influenza is circulating in the community. And as always clean your hands.

St. Joseph's Health Care London has several strategies to fight against the spread of influenza this season. When influenza is circulating in our community, all non-vaccinated staff, physicians, **visitors** and **patients** entering our building **must wear a mask** if they have daily activities that place them within two meters of other patients and/or residents.

When an influenza outbreak is declared at St. Joseph's, any staff and physicians working in the outbreak area who are not vaccinated will not be allowed to work until they get vaccinated and 14 days have passed to develop immunity, or take an antiviral medication and wear a mask. We have also made influenza vaccination a top priority in our 2013 Quality Improvement Plan.

Q. What are my requirements as a St. Joseph's visitor/patient during influenza season?

A. If you are sick or feeling unwell with symptoms of a respiratory illness and your appointment /visit can be put off, you should not come to the hospital. If you have not received your influenza vaccination, you will be required to wear a mask while in the hospital.

Q. Why do I have to wear a mask if I'm not vaccinated?

A. Masks can serve as a way to reduce the spread of influenza by catching the large droplets we put into the air when we talk, sneeze and cough. Influenza is easily passed from person to person through these droplets in the air. This can happen anywhere. The flu virus can live on porous surfaces (eg. towels) for 24-48 hours and on non-porous surfaces (eg. door handles, elevator buttons) for 8-12 hours.

Even if you do not feel sick and have no influenza-like illness symptoms you could be carrying the virus and be infectious. Wearing a mask may protect any unvaccinated patients or residents you come into contact with. This measure has also been used in other provinces and countries in health care facilities to reduce the spread of influenza-like illnesses among their patients.

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Q. What type of mask should I wear?

A. The required masks are available at all entrances to St. Joseph's buildings.

Q. When should I change my mask?

A. There is no set time for when a mask should be changed. Here are a few guidelines for proper use of masks:

- Change your mask when it becomes moist
- Change your mask when it is soiled
- Do not leave masks dangling around your neck
- Upon touching or discarding a used mask, wash your hands or use alcohol hand sanitizer
- Dispose of used masks in an appropriate waste receptacle

Q. Can the influenza vaccination give me the flu?

A. The influenza vaccine will not give you the flu as it does not contain a live virus. At the time of year the flu vaccine is given, many viruses are circulating and illnesses caused by these other viruses can be mistaken for the development of influenza.

Q. Is the influenza vaccine safe?

A. The influenza vaccine has been around for 50 years and is safe for most people. Check with your primary care physician for more information.

Q. Do I need to get the flu shot every year?

A. Yes. Flu viruses change from year to year, which means three things:

1. A vaccine made against flu viruses circulating last year may not protect against the newer viruses, which is why the flu vaccine is updated to include current viruses every year.
2. You can get the flu more than once during your lifetime.
3. Immune protection from previous year's flu vaccine may wane.

Q. When is the best time to get the flu shot and how long does it last for?

A. The best time to get your influenza vaccine is early, between October and December, before the number of influenza cases increases in Canada. Full protection against influenza takes about two weeks from the time you get the shot and lasts up to 12 months.