

# Frequently Asked Questions about Masking and Spread of Influenza



## ***How is influenza spread?***

Flu is spread person to person by tiny droplets made when people cough, sneeze, or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. People with flu can spread it to others up to about six feet away. A person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth or nose.

## ***Why are masks used?***

Although masks are not the *best* way to prevent spread, they are able to capture and contain expelled droplets that contain flu virus, which helps prevent the spread to others. Masks are used in several ways during flu season:

- Patients, family, or visitors who are coughing can be asked to wear a mask.
- Healthcare workers with mild respiratory symptoms should wear a mask to prevent coughing germs, including influenza, onto patients or other staff members.
- Unvaccinated healthcare workers must wear a mask during periods of WIDESPREAD flu, to avoid spreading influenza to others due to their unvaccinated status.

## ***Why must unvaccinated healthcare workers wear a mask?***

Unvaccinated workers have a greater chance of contracting, and subsequently spreading, influenza to others. The Rhode Island Department of Health requires that unvaccinated workers wear a mask to prevent spread of flu.

## ***But why should unvaccinated workers wear a mask if they are not even sick?***

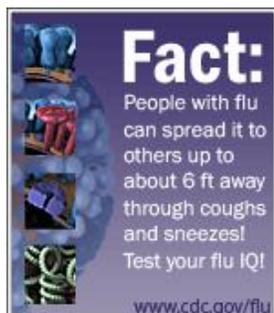
Healthy adults are able to infect others beginning one day **before** symptoms develop and up to five to seven days **after** becoming sick. Symptoms start one to four days after the virus enters the body. That means that you may be able to pass the flu to someone else before you know you are sick. Some people can be infected with the flu virus but have no symptoms. During this time, those persons may still spread the virus to others.

## ***Why do we allow unvaccinated visitors into the hospital?***

Visitors pose a different risk than healthcare workers. Healthcare workers generally come into contact with many patients throughout the day, while visitors, in general, visit only one patient. The level of risk is different. In addition, Health Department Regulations address only healthcare workers, not the public.

## ***Doesn't hand washing help prevent the spread of flu?***

Yes! Hand hygiene helps prevent spread of germs, including influenza. However, since influenza is also spread through droplets in the air, cleaning your hands alone will not completely protect against spread to others.



## ***What kind of mask should unvaccinated workers wear?***

Surgical or procedure masks will capture expelled droplets. N95 mask is not needed.

## ***How often should the mask be changed?***

The mask should be changed when damp or soiled, and at least every four hours.

## ***Do masks have to be worn on all shifts?***

Yes. Influenza is infectious day and night.

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### ***When do I have to wear the mask at work?***

Unvaccinated workers must wear a mask during periods of widespread flu activity, whenever there is a reasonable possibility of face-to-face interaction with a patient. Here are some examples of when masks are REQUIRED for unvaccinated workers:

- \* inpatient rooms, corridors, and reception desks
- \* outpatient exam rooms, waiting areas, reception desks, and corridors
- \* public areas such as the lobby, gift shop, elevator, cafeteria line (mask may be removed in the seating area to eat)

### ***What are some examples of places I do not need to wear a mask?***

Masking is not required in some restricted areas since it is unlikely that you would come face-to-face with a patient:

- \* staff lounges
- \* laboratories (provided it is restricted, no patient entry)
- \* storage rooms
- \* a private office in a non-patient area

### ***What do I say to patients who ask me why I am wearing the mask?***

You might consider responding "*Flu is widespread in Rhode Island. I am wearing a mask to protect you.*" This is a truthful statement that does not reveal your vaccine status and may comfort the patient.

### ***I don't take care of patients, does this apply to me?***

According to the regulation, a healthcare worker is any person who is employed or serves as a student, volunteer, or has an employment contract with a health care facility, and who may have contact with a patient. This includes, but is not limited to, physicians, nurses, dietary, environmental services, engineering, laboratory, diagnostic imaging, medical records, pharmacists, students, trainees, therapists, valets, clinicians, technicians, social workers, billing staff and others. Bottom line for us - anyone working or volunteering at any CNE site is a health care worker.

### ***Where are the masks?***

Masks are provided free of charge. Staff on clinical units can use surgical or procedure masks they have on the unit. Non-clinical units can place an order through Purchasing. Masks are also available at hygiene stations throughout CNE facilities.

### ***What happens if I don't wear a mask?***

If you are not vaccinated and not masked, and have a direct face-to-face encounter with a patient, you are in violation of CNE Policy and disciplinary action would commence. In addition, you could be fined by the Rhode Island Health Department, and if licensed, you could face sanctions.

### ***Is it too late to be vaccinated?***

NO! Even if you previously refused vaccine, vaccine is still available to you free of charge throughout flu season. Contact the Occupational Health Office nearest you.

### ***How well does the vaccine work?***

Vaccine effectiveness depends upon how well the vaccine is matched to circulating strains, as well as the age and health of the person being vaccinated. Vaccination is still the best way to prevent influenza, even when there is less than optimal match with some circulating strains.

