

VUMC Influenza Season Masking Policy FAQs

December 31, 2019

1) Who is required to wear a mask during influenza season?

- All unvaccinated faculty and staff who have received an approved exemption are required to wear a mask during influenza season each year. Unvaccinated personnel without an approved exemption must either get vaccinated or will be subject to the consequences noted in the VUMC Immunization Policy.

2) What type of mask is required?

- A simple surgical mask (such as used for care for patients placed in Droplet Precautions) is required; higher level respiratory protection (such as an N95 respirator) is not required.

3) When influenza season/how is the period for required mask use determined?

- The period for mask use is determined by the level of influenza activity in the region. The Department of Infection Prevention reviews data from the VUMC virology lab weekly. As per CDC standards that define increasing activity, influenza season will officially start once there is the detection of 2 or more lab-confirmed cases in 2 consecutive weeks. Once activity drops below this threshold, the season has ended.

4) Why would masking continue past March 31?

- Some years, the circulation of influenza may continue past March 31. While March 31 is used as a common end to the season, the official end is based on the metric described above.

5) How will managers and clinicians be notified of the start and end of the masking period?

- An official communication will be released from the Department of Infection Prevention noting the start and end of the masking period.

6) Where are masks required to be worn?

- Masks are required in areas where spread of influenza to patients or other healthcare personnel may occur. These areas include the following:
 - i. All areas within VUH, MCJCHV, and the Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital
 - ii. Clinical areas within Medical Center North (Round Wing floors 2-7, 3MCN medical unit, GCRC) – non-clinical areas are exempted
 - iii. All VUMC outpatient clinics, including waiting rooms
 - iv. Common areas located in VUH, MCJCHV and the Vanderbilt Psychiatric Hospital, including lobbies and other common waiting areas, and the VUH and MCJCHV food courts/cafeterias

7) Why are areas outside of patient rooms included in this requirement?

- Because influenza spreads through the air, you don't have to touch or care for a patient to cause the spread of this infection to our patients and your colleagues. For example, when riding in an elevator or working in a common or non-clinical area, you need to mask because if you are infected with influenza, it can spread to coworkers who then can get infected and spread to patients. For instance, one of our cafeteria clerks at the pay counter may never directly care for a patient, but if they have influenza, they can infect others who do.

8) If I have to wear my mask in the cafeteria, how do I eat? Are there any allowances to remove the mask?

- You definitely can remove the mask to eat/drink or for a short break, but please do this in the break rooms and minimize the amount of time you are unmasked. You may also remove the mask when working in an enclosed office alone.

9) Wearing a mask may impede the ability for me to do my job. How do I address this issue?

- For very specific functions (e.g. a speech therapist whose work with patients centers on the patient's ability to visualize the therapists mouth), a mask may impede the delivery of patient care. For those instances, specific accommodations should be requested via Employee Relations which would allow for suspension of mask use during those activities.

10) Has there been scripting created or suggested for healthcare personnel to use with patients if they are wearing a mask?

- Yes. The core message is that this is the right thing to do for our patients and for one another. VUMC wants to provide the safest environment possible for patients, healthcare personnel, and their families, and visitors to our facilities.
"I can't take the influenza vaccine, so I am wearing this mask to protect you. Masks are among the best methods to use to prevent the spread of influenza. By wearing this mask, I'm doing my part in protecting you, your family, and my co-workers from catching the flu. If you have any concerns, I am happy to listen to them and try to answer your questions."