

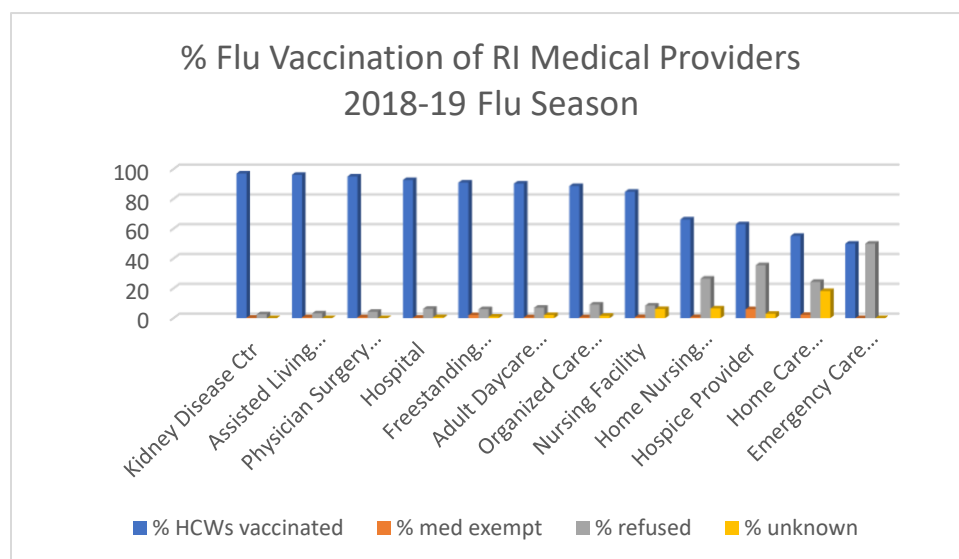


Rhode Island Public Health Brief

Rhode Island’s Mandate for Health Care Worker Flu Vaccination

Flu season is the health reason for annual vaccination

The 2018-19 disease burden from the flu in the US was more severe than any season since the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, causing 45 million illnesses, 21 million health care visits, 810 thousand hospitalizations, and 61 thousand deaths – nearly double the number of the previous season.ⁱ In RI, more than 1,000 people were [hospitalized](#) and 39 people died due to flu related illness in the 2018-2019 flu season; 95% of these were aged 50 years or older. Over half had underlying health risks.ⁱⁱ The medical cost from flu in the US is estimated at \$4.6 billion, and the 17 million work-days missed each year due to flu amounts to \$7 billion in annual sick days.ⁱⁱⁱ



Flu vaccination is perhaps the strongest tool for the prevention of illness and death caused by influenza. CDC estimates that for the 2017-18 flu season, flu vaccination prevented 6 million influenza like illnesses, 3.2 million medical visits, 91 thousand hospitalizations and 5,700 deaths across the US.^{iv}

In the state of Rhode Island, the [requirement](#) for reporting on flu vaccination is part of the license criteria. Health care workers (HCWs) may

refuse to be vaccinated, but then must sign a declaration form. The law and rule require that, for licensed medical facilities, HCWs who have direct patient contact either receive flu vaccination annually or wear a surgical mask when the Director of Health declares flu to be widespread statewide. For the 2018-19 flu season, influenza was declared to be “widespread” for 16 weeks.ⁱⁱ

What are some reasons people avoid annual flu vaccination?

Americans who prefer not to receive a flu vaccination do so for many reasons. A survey of over 1000 US adults found that more than half did not get the flu vaccine for various reasons ranging from lack of trust (48%), feeling that the vaccine was unnecessary (40%) or ineffective (26%).^v If there is a medical reason not to be vaccinated (estimated to apply to .5% of the staff in RI medical facilities),^{vi} then a medical exemption may be requested and documented, along with taking extra precautions such as [wearing a mask](#) around patients^{vii} and staying out of the work setting when feeling any signs of flu-like illness.

How well are Rhode Islanders doing with annual adult flu vaccination?

Rhode Island had the highest vaccination rate among states for adult flu vaccination in 2018-19 at 56.3%, followed by Massachusetts at 53.5% and Connecticut at 52.4%. The national average was 45.3%. Flu vaccination levels increase for 65+ age groups, with RI rates at 74.1% compared to 68.1% nationally.^{viii}

Health care workers have a higher immunization rate for annual flu vaccination than the general public. Rhode Island's rate of HCW flu vaccination (87.4%)^{vi} compares favorably to national levels (78.4%).^{ix} As shown in Figure 1, there is a range of levels of flu vaccination across the state's medical providers, with room for improvement within some types of facilities to meet *the goal of 92% for all health care worker flu vaccination by the 2020-21 season.*

By work setting, US flu vaccination coverage was highest among HCWs working in hospitals (91.9%). RI has a similar level at 92.7%. Nationally, flu vaccination coverage continues to be lower among US HCWs working in long-term care (LTC) settings (67.4%) compared with those working in hospitals and ambulatory settings (75.1%). Vaccination coverage was highest (94.8%) among healthcare personnel working in settings where vaccination was required as a condition of employment.^x

RI flu vaccination data is collected for licensed medical facility types, including staff influenza vaccination, medical exemptions, and refusals. RI does not collect data on which medical facilities require flu vaccination for staff as a condition of employment.

The importance of annual flu vaccination for healthcare workers

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), and the Healthcare Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee (HICPAC) [recommend](#) that all U.S. health care workers get vaccinated annually against influenza. Health care workers, as a group of professionals, are most likely to have face-to-face contact with members of the public who may have the flu or have weaker resistance to illness caused by influenza. *Flu vaccination protects both the health care workers and the people they serve.*

Robust levels of HCW flu vaccination is essential, particularly in the worst-case scenario, during a bad flu season (i.e. several months of widespread influenza and a high number of cases of flu). The COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020-21 flu season makes flu vaccination more urgent. A greater number of people need more medical care, meaning our society relies more on health care staff and medical facilities. *Health care workers are the lifeline for all of us when we need medical help.* Maintaining the health and wellbeing of health care workers is one of the driving forces for HCW flu vaccination.

Making an *informed choice* about annual flu vaccination is the best way to protect yourself from preventable illnesses caused by the flu. Although Rhode Island's mandate does not require disclosure of the reasons for requesting a medical exemption from flu vaccination, exemptions for health care workers should be discussed with your medical provider. This would assure a clear understanding of the value of flu vaccination for staff as well as how immunization of health care workers is an important protection for the people being served.

ⁱ CDC, Disease Burden of Influenza (preliminary data estimate for 2018-19 flu season) – <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden/index.html>

ⁱⁱ Berns, Abby, MPH, Teevan, Bridget, MPH, Influenza Surveillance Report 2018-2019 Season – health.ri.gov/surveillance/2019/influenza.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Influenza in the Workplace, 3/18/18, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health - <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/flu/activities.html>

^{iv} 2017-18 Est. Influenza Illnesses, Medical Visits, Hospitalizations, and Deaths Averted by Vaccination in the U.S., CDC

^v Research America! Survey of U.S. adults, May 2018

^{vi} Flu Vaccination of Healthcare Workers 2018-2019, RI Department of Health, Office of Immunization -

<http://www.health.ri.gov/data/vaccination/healthcareworkers/index.php>

^{vii} Immunization for Health Care Workers, RIDOH – health.ri.gov/immunization/for/healthcareworkers

^{viii} Estimates of Influenza Coverage Among Adults – U.S. 2017-18 Flu Season, CDC – <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/fluview/coverage-1819estimates.htm>

^{ix} Flu Vaccination Coverage for Health Care Workers 2018-19, CDC - <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/healthcareworkers>

^x CDC, Influenza Vaccination Among Healthcare Personnel-US 2018-19 Flu Season, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/fluview/hcp-coverage-1819estimates.htm>