Guidance for Influenza Vaccine Delivery in the Presence of COVID-19 (October 20, 2022)

Preamble
The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for the delivery of seasonal influenza vaccine in fall 2022, when ongoing COVID-19 activity is continuing to stress public health capacity and affect clinic operations and attendance. This guidance was originally developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), in consultation with the Canadian Immunization Committee and the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), and has been adapted by the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) to be applicable to the BC context.

Reducing the burden of influenza is particularly important this fall and winter to prevent an increase in health care utilization at the same time as there is continuing COVID-19 infection across communities. In its seasonal influenza vaccine statement for 2022-2023, NACI advises that priority should be given to providing influenza vaccine to persons at high risk of influenza complications and those capable of transmitting infection to them.

The seasonal influenza immunization campaign provides an opportunity to ensure consideration of the diverse needs of population groups based on access to services, vulnerabilities, ethnicity/culture, and other socioeconomic and demographic factors. These approaches may also be useful for the provision and catch-up of routine immunization. Additional advice for the provision of routine immunization programs during the COVID-19 pandemic is available from the Continuity of Immunization Services during COVID-19.

Challenges posed by COVID-19
The COVID-19 pandemic creates a series of challenges for the delivery of the seasonal influenza immunization program, including:

- The need for measures to avoid transmission of COVID-19 to staff, volunteers and clients (many of whom are at increased risk of severe disease from both influenza and COVID-19);
- The availability of personnel to provide immunizations, as staff may be deployed to COVID-19 work and precautions apply to the involvement of staff or volunteers who are at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19;
- Access to or suitability of usual venues for immunization administration;
- Risk of a resurgence of COVID-19 activity concurrently with scheduled influenza immunization delivery;
- Public fear of exposure to COVID-19 while accessing immunization services; and
- Potentially increased demand for influenza vaccine starting early in the campaign.
Recommendations for influenza immunization programs
Consider alternate models of influenza vaccine delivery this fall

Health authorities across the province use varying systems for their seasonal influenza program, and local factors also play an important role in the planning and delivery of influenza vaccine. This fall, jurisdictions should consider a wide range of strategies to deliver influenza vaccine, with the goal of reducing crowding while maintaining or increasing vaccine uptake. Alternate models include the use of non-traditional settings such as outdoor venues and outreach clinics.

Approaches to be considered include:

- Schedule extended clinic hours to reduce overcrowding;
- Provide immunization opportunistically to patients and their companions when they are discharged from hospital or are seen for other reasons (e.g., at primary care offices, outpatient clinics or pharmacies);
- In primary care settings, designate specific times for immunization clinics to ensure that only well persons are in the area at the time, e.g., at the start or end of the day;
- Cooperate with other clinics / medical practices to operate a joint influenza vaccine clinic in a dedicated space with dedicated staff;
- Create special hours for seniors and other vulnerable persons at pharmacies and other venues to provide influenza vaccine;
- Administer vaccines outdoors (weather permitting) – e.g., in a provider’s parking lot or a drive-through clinic;
- Establish mobile clinics in vans or buses to visit neighbourhoods;
- Develop an outreach strategy to administer influenza vaccine to vulnerable persons, housebound persons, and seniors who are sheltering in place;
- Provide immunization during home care visits;
- As in previous years in B.C., continue to administer influenza vaccine at congregate living centres, e.g., retirement homes, group homes, homeless shelters, student residences and in correctional facilities;
- Have health care organizations, including long-term care facilities provide their own immunization for staff, volunteers and patients/clients (usual practice); and
- Encourage workplaces to organize their own on-site immunization programs.

Adaptations to usual immunization procedures
The text box below highlights the types of adaptations to usual immunization practices that are recommended in the presence of COVID-19 activity. The sections that follow provide additional details.
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Adaptations to usual immunization procedures

- Advance communication to clients about clinic adaptations to ensure their safety
- Screening for COVID-19 illness – staff, volunteers and clients
- Space arrangement – may affect the physical layout and number of clients that can be accommodated at any given time
- Infection prevention and control (IPC) requirements, including the need for personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Increased environmental cleaning
- Potential need for longer hours and increased staff
- Use of appointment systems to reduce clinic crowding
- Use of technology and other methods to reduce contact (e.g., on-line registration, paperless registration, consent and recording processes)
- Visible and audible communications explaining COVID-19 adaptations to influenza immunization campaigns in accessible formats

Advance communication

Inform clients about measures you are taking to ensure their safety while attending the clinic. This can be done through voice recordings or phone calls, advance email or text messaging, and your website.

Inform clients that they should postpone their visit if they have symptoms of COVID-19.

Screening and entry – all venues

All persons attending the venue should be passively screened (through signage) and actively screened before entry, even if they were already pre-screened by telephone when the appointment was made. Staff and volunteers should be screened before each shift. See the COVID-19 entrance screening tool for health-care facilities.

Signage at the door should advise people not to enter if they are ill. Advise everyone entering the venue to use the hand sanitizer provided on entry, practice respiratory etiquette, and maintain a respectful distance from others to ensure personal space. Recommend clients wear a mask that fully covers their mouth and nose. Provide masks in a hygienic manner (e.g., using tongs) to clients coming in without masks. For immunization in community settings, clients can continue wearing their own masks and are not required to change to medical masks.

If any persons are identified with symptoms on arrival at the venue, they should be instructed to perform hand hygiene, put on a medical mask and direct them to the BCCDC website or the BC COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool to determine eligibility for testing and how to get tested. Immunization may proceed at the discretion of the immunizer.

Space Arrangement

In indoor spaces, people should have enough space available to be respectful of others’ personal space (i.e., the distance from which a person feels comfortable being next to another person, and sufficient space is available to prevent involuntary physical contact with another person), using strategies such as:
• Schedule appointments to avoid crowds;
• Ask people to arrive at their assigned time;
• Have people wait in cars and calling them in when ready (by phone or text);
• Use signage, barriers or floor markings for persons who are waiting;
• Space chairs in waiting areas to use all of the available space. Allot increased space for people using wheelchairs, walkers or strollers and for families and companions; and
• Monitor entries and exits, waiting areas and lineups to maintain personal spacing.

Infection prevention and control (IPC)

IPC measures are needed to prevent transmission of COVID-19 in the immunization setting. These include:

• Require ill staff and volunteers to stay at home; ideally, clients who are unwell should remain at home.
• Screen clients for symptoms and triage as appropriate (as described in the Screening and Entry section);
• Maintain existing physical barrier(s) installed during COVID-19 pandemic if they do not impede normal operations, such as clear plastic barriers at reception areas and between immunization stations in community clinics;
• Implement administrative controls to ensure people have enough space available to be respectful of others’ personal space (as described in the Space Arrangement and Clinic set-up sections);
• Have a separate area for processing people who require extra support (e.g., a person who is unable to wear a mask because of a physical, behavioural or cognitive impairment or health condition).
• Provide hand sanitizer stations throughout the venue, including entry, immunization stations, after care area and exit;
• Ensure that administration, clinical and patient areas, and washrooms are cleaned and disinfected frequently (guidance for cleaning and disinfection is available at Environmental Cleaning and Disinfectants for Clinic Settings);
• Clean and disinfect immunization stations between clients (e.g., with disinfecting wipes);
• Carry out hand hygiene before and after providing immunization; and
• Ensure that all staff are trained in the use of PPE (see donning and doffing PPE).

Considerations for PPE selection

The immunization procedure requires close physical proximity between the immunizer and the client. The following recommendations are in alignment with those of the Provincial Infection Control Network (PICNet).
Staff and volunteers

- Immunizers, staff and volunteers in an immunization clinic must wear a medical mask (e.g., recovery room monitors and first aid providers); eye protection may also be used based on a point-of-care risk assessment, and per additional precautions, where indicated.
- Immunizers need not wear gloves, except when administering intranasal influenza vaccine or oral non-influenza vaccines (e.g., rotavirus) because of an increased likelihood of contact with a client’s mucous membranes and bodily fluids during these procedures. Gloves should be changed between clients and hand hygiene performed after gloves are removed. Administration of intranasal influenza vaccine is not an aerosol-generating procedure, and additional precautions, such as N95 respirators for immunizers, are not recommended;
- PPE may be used for the full duration of a shift, i.e., extended use of the same mask and eye protection but should be replaced after a break. Soiled, wet or damaged masks should be replaced; and
- PPE including medical mask, eye protection, gown and gloves should be immediately available to all personnel who need to provide first aid or respond to a health emergency.

When immunization is provided during another health care visit (e.g., primary care visit, home care or while in hospital), it is anticipated that the health care professional will already be using appropriate PPE for the situation. Additional IPC guidance is available for primary care providers and home care providers.

Clients and their companions

Recommend clients and their companions wear a mask that fully covers their mouth and nose. This recommendation may be waived for young children for whom mask use is problematic. In addition, non-medical masks or face coverings should not be placed on children under the age of two years, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unable to remove the mask without assistance.

Clinic set up and immunization process

Priority clinic modifications for COVID-19 have already been identified in this document (screening for illness, space arrangement, and IPC measures). The following are additional suggestions for modifying the clinic set up and immunization process:

- Assess the physical suitability of the site, including the adequacy of ventilation; however, it is appreciated that ideal sites are not always available;
- Consider the size of the site, space arrangement, and venue capacity when determining the number of clients that can be scheduled in a given time period;
- Provide extra clinic staff and volunteers as needed, e.g., to monitor traffic flow and waiting areas, screen, assist with registration and consent processes, and clean;
- Use an appointment system (e.g., online or through a call centre) to make appointments, collect registration information and conduct pre-clinic wellness screening;

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Instruct clients to wear accessible clothing (e.g., short sleeves) to minimize the need for removal of clothing and possibly the mask to gain access to the arm, and to bring a medical or non-medical mask to wear at the clinic;

- Adjust consent and recording processes to reduce contact, make them paperless if possible; have staff complete information forms on behalf of clients, and if a signature is needed for consent, regularly clean pens used by clients;
- Minimize movement through the clinic to avoid clients walking through administrative areas, e.g., use a dedicated entrance/exit (where available) and establish one-way traffic flow;
- Ensure that the cold chain is maintained in all settings including outreach and mobile clinics and outdoor clinics;
- Ensure that clients can be monitored for the recommended observation period following immunization in all settings including mobile and drive-through clinics
  - NACI recommends a 15-minute observation period post-immunization because during this period of time a large proportion of rare but potentially serious allergic events (anaphylaxis) and syncope (fainting, including with fall and head injury or seizure) can occur. However, in certain circumstances, a shorter observation period of at least 5 minutes may be considered after influenza immunization during the COVID-19 pandemic, but only during times when appropriate physical distancing in post-vaccination waiting areas cannot otherwise be maintained due to the volume of individuals seeking immunization. A shortened observation period following influenza vaccine administration may be considered on a case-by-case basis for clients who have received influenza vaccine before, do not have a history of severe allergic reaction to the influenza vaccine or its components, do not have a history of syncope following receipt of any vaccine, agree to stay in the vicinity of the clinic (e.g., parking lot) for at least 15 minutes post immunization with another responsible adult who knows when and how to seek prompt medical attention, and agree not to operate a motorized vehicle during that time.
- Ensure that the supplies necessary to manage anaphylaxis are readily available.3

Vaccine information can be provided in ways that minimize the use of paper, for example:

- Consider providing vaccine information online or in advance by mail or email;
- At the clinic, provide pre-immunization information on large wall posters or using videos in pre-immunization and post immunization observation areas; add QR codes for additional information; and
- Ensure that information is accessible (e.g., available in multiple languages as needed).

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2 Thirty minutes is a safer duration when there is a specific concern about a possible vaccine reaction to the biological product or a component of the biological product.

Additional considerations for other settings

School-based clinics

School-based clinics are used to deliver routine immunizations to children and teens. These clinics may be affected by the impact of ongoing COVID-19 activity on school operation, attendance and public health resource availability. For immunization in educational settings, clients must follow the mask requirements of their school.

Considerations for delivery of vaccines at school include:

- Potential need to hold clinics over several days if student attendance is staggered;
- Accessibility of sites usually used for immunization such as gyms or cafeterias;
- Staggering immunization tables and seating in waiting areas to ensure that people are spread out within the available space; and
- Calling in students according to classroom cohorts, if applicable.

Outreach and mobile clinics

Outreach clinics are an effective way to reach underserved and vulnerable populations and persons unable to attend conventional immunization sites. 4,5,6 It is important to choose the location carefully. The best options are places that are most frequented by the vulnerable population(s) being targeted, e.g., food banks, shelters for persons experiencing homelessness, centres providing free meals, centres for immigrants and refugees. Partnering with trusted community leaders is also recommended along with advance clinic promotion to encourage attendance and cultural safety.

Additional information can be found in the references provided above and a CDC resource: Checklist of best practices for vaccination clinics held at satellite, temporary or off-site locations.

Outdoor venues, including drive-through clinics

Drive-through and parking lot clinics (also called drive-in clinics) have been used successfully in some jurisdictions in past seasons for the seasonal influenza vaccine and are particularly useful for people with reduced mobility or those who are apprehensive about a clinic setting. In the COVID-19 situation, these provide a way to maintain distance from others by avoiding waiting rooms and lineups.

Potential issues for program planners include inclement weather, availability of suitable locales, and occupational health concerns for immunizers (e.g., exposure to auto exhaust or ergonomic issues if they are trying to reach far into a car). There is also potential for shoulder injury in the recipient if the arm is

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not adequately visualized while they are in the car, resulting in incorrect landmarking of the injection site.  

*Parking lot clinics* – Providing immunization in the parking lot may be a viable option for some primary care practitioners, pharmacies and public health departments. Detailed advice for mounting a parking lot clinic (also called a drive-in clinic) can be found in an Australian resource: [NSW guidance for drive-in immunization clinics](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/healthservices/healthcareproviders/immunisation/immunisation-clinics/drivein.html).

*Drive-through clinics* – These clinics are larger-scale operations that may be mounted in fixed or rotating locations. Potential venues should offer shelter for the immunization team and sufficient parking for the required post-immunization observation period. Possibilities include community buildings with a marquee, car washes, warehouses, insurance inspection stations, arena parking lots or drive-through tents erected for the occasion.

Planning logistics have been described, including the development of a traffic flow pattern with traffic lanes for the consent and immunization processes and adequate parking spaces for post-immunization monitoring.  

Clients should be instructed to wear loose-fitting clothes to allow easy access to the deltoid area, and should wear a medical or non-medical mask. Clients should be seated to allow window or door access for the immunizer, who should not enter the car. Parents/guardians may hold their child on their lap for the child’s immunization. The entire upper arm (or upper outer thigh in infants) should be exposed to find the correct injection site.

*Remote and isolated communities*

Remote and isolated communities have many years of experience with influenza immunization campaigns. In these settings, many of the adaptations outlined earlier in this document will be applicable; however, additional considerations may be needed. Suggestions include:

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• Using fly-in teams as an efficient way to provide influenza immunization in some remote and isolated communities. Such teams must be carefully screened according to jurisdictional direction before travel;
• Collaborate with trusted community leaders and Community Health Representatives;
• Promote the clinics as a way to provide community protection in addition to personal protection;
• Set up in popular locations such as grocery stores, and provide immunization door-to-door later for persons unable to attend the clinic; and
• Provide immunization at community pharmacies if accessible in the community.

Lack of internet connectivity in many remote and isolated communities may prevent the use of electronic systems for appointments, registration or recording.
Additional Resources

Canada:


USA:


Australia:


WHO:

