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| Vaccination requirements for healthcare workers |
| Frequently asked questions  |
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On 25 March 2020, the *Health Services Amendment (Mandatory Vaccination of Healthcare Workers) Act 2020* came into effect, inserting new sections into the *Health Services Act 1988* and *Ambulance Services Act 1986*. The new sections enable the Secretary of the Department of Health to direct health services to require vaccination against selected vaccine-preventable diseases to better protect Victorians and create a safer healthcare system.

Secretary Directions are now in place that require some healthcare workers to be vaccinated against influenza and COVID-19.

Additional Ministerial Directions requiring influenza vaccination are also in place for Forensicare employees under the *Mental Health Act 2014*.

Being vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself and those around you, especially those who are vulnerable, from getting influenza or COVID-19.

#### Why do healthcare workers need to be vaccinated?

As an occupational group, healthcare workers are at increased risk of vaccine-preventable disease if not vaccinated. Additionally, if not vaccinated, healthcare workers may pose an increased risk of disease transmission to other workers and patients, particularly those who are vulnerable because of age, pregnancy, immunosuppression or acute or chronic disease.

#### Which settings do the vaccination requirements apply in?

The requirement for vaccination applies to all healthcare workers in:

* public health services
* public hospitals
* denominational hospitals
* private hospitals and day procedure centres
* ambulance services
* patient transport services that are engaged by a health service or Ambulance Victoria
* residential aged care services operated by a public hospital, public health service or denominational hospital
* Forensicare (influenza vaccine only)

Vaccination requirements apply to current and prospective employees (including contractors, locums and agency workers) and visiting medical officers (VMOs).

#### Why are some vaccinations now required by Secretary Directions for Victorian healthcare workers?

Previously in Victoria, there were guidelines recommending healthcare worker vaccination, however, there was no legislative tool to enact these guidelines. The introduction of vaccination requirements for healthcare workers under amendments to the *Health Services Act 1998* and *Ambulance Services Act 1986* and *Mental Health Act 2014* brings Victoria in line with other states and territories that have successfully introduced similar mandatory vaccination requirements.

The objectives of introducing vaccination requirements of healthcare workers are to:

* reduce risks of vaccine-preventable disease for healthcare workers
* mitigate the risk of transmission of vaccine-preventable diseases to patients
* reduce workforce absence due to illness

#### Which vaccines are required?

The seasonal **influenza** and **COVID-19 vaccines** are required for some healthcare workers from 2022.

#### Why is vaccination required for influenza and COVID-19 but not any other infectious diseases?

The influenza vaccine was prioritised in 2022 because there was a potential public health risk with the reintroduction of influenza infection after little to no disease in circulation due to closed borders. 2022 was the worst flu season since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 remains a serious risk to public health in Victoria, with persistently high community transmission leading to high hospitalisation rates and deaths. Some of those who have recovered from COVID-19 have also been shown to have widespread impacts on health and wellbeing due to ‘long COVID’. Vaccination remains an effective intervention that reduces the risk of severe illness, hospitalisation and death caused by COVID-19.

#### Why has the COVID-19 vaccination requirement been continued in healthcare settings, and not in other industries?

Healthcare settings are considered high-risk settings, where people at risk of severe illness, complications or death from COVID-19 congregate. Requiring healthcare workers of certain healthcare settings to be vaccinated protects patients as much as possible from becoming infected with COVID-19 while they access the health care services they need.

#### Does everyone working in a health service need to be vaccinated? What about staff that never see patients?

The COVID-19 vaccine is required for all employees of the health services above, in recognition of the transmissibility of COVID-19. People who do not care directly for patients can still transmit COVID-19 to them through use of shared amenities, or indirectly through sharing workplaces and amenities with their patient-facing colleagues.

The requirement for influenza vaccination applies only to healthcare workers whose role requires them to have direct physical contact with patients, clients, deceased persons or body parts, blood, body substances, infectious material or surfaces or equipment that might contain any of the aforementioned, or where they are required to work in a clinical area where they may be exposed to influenza infection spread by droplets.

All healthcare workers are strongly encouraged to receive the annual influenza vaccine, regardless of their role or where they are employed.

#### Are students and volunteers required to be vaccinated?

Students and volunteers are not subject to Secretary Directions; however, a health service may reasonably require that students and/or volunteers meet vaccination requirements before commencing roles or placements within the setting at their discretion.

#### What does fully vaccinated/fully vaccinated (boosted) mean? How many doses of COVID vaccine should I have had?

Most healthcare workers will require **three doses of COVID-19 vaccine**.

Healthcare workers under 18 years of age need to be fully vaccinated for COVID-19. Healthcare workers aged 18 years and over need to be fully vaccinated (boosted) for COVID-19.

**Fully vaccinated** means the worker has received:

* one dose of a one dose COVID-19 vaccine; or
* two doses of a two dose COVID-19 vaccine including two different types of two dose COVID-19 vaccines.

**Fully vaccinated** **(boosted)** means the worker has received a booster dose. A worker has received a **booster dose** if they have received:

* a second dose of a COVID-19 vaccine after receiving one dose of a one dose COVID-19 vaccine; or
* a third dose of a COVID-19 vaccine after receiving two doses of a two dose COVID-19 vaccine including different types of two dose COVID-19 vaccines.

#### What evidence of vaccination is required?

All current and prospective healthcare workers must demonstrate evidence of their vaccination or exemption/contraindication to vaccination to their employer. This may be a current digital or printed Immunisation History Statement from the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) and/or a digital or printed COVID-19 vaccination certificate. Workers need to demonstrate evidence of vaccination for all vaccines that are required for their role.

#### What if I have a contraindication to the influenza or COVID-19 vaccine?

Healthcare workers who are unable to be vaccinated due to medical contraindications to vaccination must demonstrate evidence of this to their employer. The healthcare service should undertake a review of the role and duties of workers who cannot be vaccinated due to medical contraindications to ensure their health and safety at work.

Healthcare workers that are unable to be vaccinated due to a medical contraindication to any vaccine will not have their employment terminated, nor can an employer discriminate against a current or prospective employee who has a medical contraindication to vaccination.

#### What if I choose not to be vaccinated?

Prospective employees for roles where vaccination requirements apply may not be employed by a healthcare setting if they refuse to comply with the requirements for non-medical reasons.

When a current healthcare worker does not comply with vaccination requirements, they should talk to their employer to determine if options such as working from home, obtaining access to accrued annual leave, using any long service leave entitlements, or accessing unpaid leave for a specified or indefinite period are possible (at the employer’s discretion).

An employer may choose to redeploy staff who refuse to be vaccinated against influenza to areas of higher to lower risk (for patients), or require additional personal protective equipment (PPE). These strategies are not available where a worker is not vaccinated for COVID-19, in recognition of its high transmissibility.

Workers who are not compliant with vaccination requirements may be allowed to work in an emergency or extraordinary circumstance at the discretion of their employer.

#### Where can I get vaccinated?

Many health services offer an employee vaccination program. The influenza and COVID-19 vaccines are also available through general practice and community pharmacies. The influenza vaccine is additionally available through some local council immunisation services.

#### Where can I find out more information about the influenza vaccine?

The following resources are available to learn more about influenza vaccination:

* [Seasonal influenza vaccine (health.vic.gov.au)](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/seasonal-influenza-vaccine)
* [Better Health Channel – Flu (influenza) – immunisation](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/flu-influenza-immunisation)
* [ATAGI advice on seasonal influenza vaccines in 2022](https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/atagi-advice-on-seasonal-influenza-vaccines-in-2022)
* [Australian Immunisation Handbook - influenza](https://immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au/vaccine-preventable-diseases/influenza-flu)

#### Where can I find out more information about the COVID vaccine?

* [ATAGI clinical recommendations COVID-19 vaccination](https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/advice-for-providers/clinical-guidance/clinical-recommendations#:~:text=ATAGI%20recommends%20COVID%2D19%20vaccination,significant%20or%20complex%20health%20needs.)
* [The Victorian Department of Health COVID-19 vaccine information page](https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines)
* [The Australian Department of Health COVID-19 vaccine information page](https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines)

#### Where can I go for more information about the vaccination requirements?

Healthcare workers should speak to their current or prospective employer in the first instance to understand their vaccination requirements for their role.

More information including copies of the Secretary Directions and policy guidance for healthcare settings is available at <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/vaccination-for-healthcare-workers> or by emailing immunisation@health.vic.au.

To receive this document in another format, phone 03 9500 7471, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email the Immunisation Unit <immunisation@health.vic.gov.au>.

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