



## Promising Practices for Health Plans Promoting Flu Vaccinations for Dually Eligible Beneficiaries During the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic

Older adults and adults of any age with chronic conditions, including many people dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid, face increased risk of adverse outcomes related to the flu, including hospitalization and death.<sup>1,2</sup> Dually eligible individuals are also at greater risk for severe outcomes related to the COVID-19 public health emergency.<sup>3</sup> The SARS-CoV-2 virus (which causes COVID-19) and the influenza virus may co-circulate in the community simultaneously, and people can become infected with both at the same time. This “twindemic,” presence of both viruses at the same time, could place tremendous burden on the health care system and result in many illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths.<sup>4</sup> As a result, flu vaccinations for dually eligible individuals are more important than ever. Evidence shows that flu vaccinations decrease flu severity and flu-related hospitalizations.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, flu vaccination uptake may reduce health care system burden during the ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency and in any future public health emergencies.<sup>6</sup>

Health plans play a key role in facilitating access to, and educating members on, the importance of annual flu vaccinations. This tip sheet describes specific strategies for promoting flu vaccinations and ensuring members can safely receive a vaccine (i.e., with appropriate physical distance and personal protective equipment (PPE)) during the COVID-19 public health emergency, planning for flu season, communication and education methods, effective outreach and incentives, and supporting members.

While this tip sheet focuses on promising practices for flu vaccinations, many of these practices will also be applicable to health plan efforts to support COVID-19 vaccinations of their members. Resources specific to COVID-19 vaccination are included at the end of this tip sheet, and more guidance is provided at [www.coronavirus.gov](http://www.coronavirus.gov).

### COVID-19 Considerations

The ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency provides a critical opportunity to message about flu vaccinations, as members may be more aware of the need to take individual action to protect themselves, their family, and their community.

- ⚙ The risk of contracting COVID-19 and associated hesitation in visiting clinics or provider offices present additional obstacles to flu vaccination. A member’s perception of COVID-19 exposure risk may also impact their willingness to obtain flu vaccinations. COVID-19 has also impacted flu vaccine delivery through the increased need for PPE and social distancing.
- ⚙ People with an active COVID-19 infection should delay getting their flu vaccine until they meet [criteria](#) to discontinue their isolation to avoid exposing others. People with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection, regardless of symptoms, should defer routine vaccinations, and everyone should be screened for COVID-19 symptoms before and during the visit.<sup>7</sup>
- ⚙ Members may assume they are properly protected from flu because of COVID-19 infection control protocols they may be following, including mask wearing, hand-washing, and physical distancing. While these measures help prevent the spread of flu, they do not provide complete protection. Consider

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educating members on the importance of a flu vaccination as a critical tool to prevent flu, in addition to infection control protocols.

Health plans can consider the following strategies for promoting flu vaccinations during a public health emergency such as COVID-19:

- ⚙️ **Educate members on the difference between the flu and other illnesses with flu-like symptoms.** While more is learned every day about COVID-19 and the virus that causes it, much is still unknown. It is important for health plans to communicate clearly with members so they understand how to protect themselves and others from the flu and other respiratory illnesses such as COVID-19.<sup>8</sup>
- ⚙️ **Organize drive-thru or outdoor flu vaccination events.** Local hospitals and clinics may already have established a drive-thru infrastructure to provide COVID-19 testing. Consider working with these facilities to provide drive-thru flu vaccinations, which could help ease concerns about potential exposures to COVID-19 in an indoor setting.
  - ▶ In planning for drive-thru or outdoor vaccinations, determine possible safety-related considerations for each vaccination site and develop protocols to mitigate any potential issues. For example, establish a designated space for monitoring members for 10 to 15 minutes following vaccination for adverse reactions before they depart from the site.
  - ▶ Support member education and access to plan-covered transportation benefits to provide rides to vaccination locations.
  - ▶ Health plans may also consider hosting socially distant outdoor events within the community, using a mobile clinic to administer flu vaccinations.
  - ▶ More information on how to safely operate a vaccination site during the COVID-19 public health emergency can be found [here](#).
- ⚙️ **Provide in-home vaccinations for members who are unable to leave their home.** Encouraging providers to make house calls to provide vaccinations, and informing members of the availability of this service, can assist members who cannot leave their homes and who may not otherwise have access to a flu vaccination, especially during a public health emergency.

## Flu Season Planning

While influenza viruses circulate year-round, flu activity peaks between December and February.<sup>9</sup> Proactive planning for flu season can help health plans effectively leverage staff, resources, and external partnerships in order to promote flu vaccinations among members. Health plans can consider employing the following strategies for flu season planning:

- ⚙️ **Establish flu planning committees.** Flu prevention committees bring together health plan staff to evaluate successes and lessons learned during the prior flu season, consider current needs, determine timing for implementation, identify populations at greater risk of not receiving the vaccination, coordinate outreach methods, and develop new modalities of outreach. Some health plan flu prevention committees meet year-round to maintain focus on vaccination initiatives and some plans are leveraging these existing teams to support COVID-19 vaccination efforts. Other plans have expanded the scope of their committees to include all vaccines,

### Considerations for Engaging Members in Plan Governance During a Public Health Emergency

Public health emergencies, including COVID-19, present barriers for gathering in community settings. Web-based video services can assist health plans in engaging members virtually. Familiarity with these services may vary, so health plans may need to work directly with members to assist them in accessing these applications. For more information on how to engage members in plan governance during public health emergencies, reference the [Engaging Members In Plan Governance During COVID-19: A Panel Discussion](#).

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including flu vaccines and COVID-19 vaccines. Many vaccine committees include health plan staff and stakeholder representation across lines of business, quality improvement, medical management, and long-term services and supports (LTSS).

- ⚙️ **Work with local partners.** Local clinics and pharmacies can serve as partners for health plans in flu vaccination promotion and delivery. Engaging with these partners well before flu season can help coordinate messaging and identify opportunities to increase availability of flu vaccinations at community locations. Other partners, such as housing authorities and retirement communities, can disseminate flu vaccination promotion materials and, if safety measures can be assured, may serve as sites for health education and vaccinations outside clinic settings.
- ⚙️ **Gather member feedback early.** Engaging members via consumer advisory councils can assist health plans in understanding member needs and concerns around vaccinations, including flu and COVID-19 vaccinations. Gathering member feedback in time to inform outreach and communication strategies can be critical to developing effective and culturally competent outreach methods and materials. Member apprehension about flu and COVID-19 vaccinations may be based on a range of cultural and individual concerns and better understanding of those concerns can improve outreach methods and messaging.

## Flu Vaccination Education

Reinforcing the importance of flu vaccinations, as well as addressing concerns members may have around getting vaccinated, remains critical. Health plans can consider the following strategies for emphasizing the importance of flu vaccinations. These strategies may also be applied to COVID-19 vaccines:

- ⚙️ **Listen to member concerns expressed in member advisory councils, interactions with the care management team, and conversations with providers.** As noted above, members may have apprehension based on myths they have heard about flu vaccinations, and vaccinations more broadly. Health plans should seek out member input, which can help health plans understand and address these concerns, while also informing future outreach strategies.
- ⚙️ **Develop resources for dispelling myths.** Health plans can use the information they learn from members to customize resources aimed at dispelling myths around the flu vaccination. Attitudes about flu vaccinations may be influenced by a member's community and culture, so feedback from a diverse member advisory council that represents the local member population is critical in designing resources.
- ⚙️ **Prepare care management teams to discuss member questions.** Providing easily accessible resources, scripting, and practice conversations to care management teams can assist them in addressing member concerns around flu vaccinations, while also respecting individual beliefs. Health plans should also share information about local flu vaccination clinics with care managers so they can assist members in locating appropriate sites.

### Addressing Myths

Some health plans have developed flyers, based on member feedback, to address common myths and concerns around receiving flu vaccinations. An example from First Choice VIP Care Plus in South Carolina can be found [here](#).

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## Outreach to Promote Flu Vaccinations

Thoughtful and consistent outreach strategies can assist health plans in reaching members through multiple avenues. Consider the following tactics when developing outreach strategies for flu vaccination promotion:

- ⚙️ **Target outreach to high-risk members.** Prioritize outreach to members who may be at high risk for poor flu-related outcomes, including adults over 65, individuals with chronic conditions, and those who have had a hospitalization due to COVID-19 related illness. Integrate flu vaccination messaging into all contacts with high-risk members.

### Member Outreach in Multiple Languages

Consider the member population needs when developing and disseminating materials containing information related to flu vaccinations, including providing materials in other languages. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has developed flu vaccination marketing materials in multiple languages, available in the Additional Resources section of this document.

- ⚙️ **Utilize a variety of outreach methods.** An effective outreach strategy will include different forms of communication to meet a range of member needs and preferences. Outreach methods can include:
  - ▶ **Direct member outreach**, through text messages, outbound calls, interactive phone messaging, mailers, and landing pages on health plan websites.
  - ▶ **Community outreach**, through media interviews, public service announcements, newsletter content, social media, and infographics.
  - ▶ **Provider outreach**, by developing and distributing toolkits and resources for providers focused on educating members on the importance and availability of the flu vaccination.

## Supports and Incentives

Providing supports and incentives can assist members who may experience barriers in flu vaccination access and increase flu vaccination rates. Health plans seeking to utilize supports and incentives in this manner can consider the following strategies:

- ⚙️ **Address barriers to vaccination.** Health plans can minimize barriers to vaccination by determining potential community or individual needs that may prevent access to vaccination and working with members to address those needs. For example, health plans can offer transportation services to assist members who do not have access, including those who live in rural areas.
- ⚙️ **Mail masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer to members.** Providing protective materials to members may support them in safely visiting a flu vaccination clinic.
- ⚙️ **Develop a gift card incentive program.** Providing a gift card incentive for members who receive their flu vaccination can increase vaccination rates and raise awareness of flu vaccinations. Health plans that do not already do so may consider providing these incentives to further promote flu vaccinations during COVID-19.

To learn more about utilizing incentives, please reference Resources for Integrated Care's [Wellness Rewards and Incentives Programs: Tips for Medicare-Medicaid Plans](#).

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## Additional Resources

Please refer to the below resources for more information related to flu vaccinations.

### [CMS Flu Vaccine Partner Toolkit](#)

This toolkit from CMS assists plans in staying informed on CMS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the United States Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) materials available on the importance of the flu vaccine. The toolkit is designed for clinicians, Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries, and the general public.

### [2022-2023 CDC Vaccine Recommendations](#)

This report focuses on recommendations and guidance for the use of seasonal influenza vaccines for the prevention and control of influenza during the 2022–23 season in the United States.

### [CDC Seasonal Flu Partner Resources Center](#)

This collection of resources is updated annually with social media toolkits, print materials, podcasts, and other communication materials to equip organizations and individuals with materials they can distribute to increase awareness and educate the public regarding the vaccine.

### [CMS Flu Shot Outreach & Media Material in More Languages](#)

These materials include translated postcards promoting flu shots, available in English, Arabic, Armenian, Cambodian, Chinese, Cape Verdean Creole, Farsi, Haitian Creole, Hindi, Hmong, Korean, Laotian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

Please refer to the below resources for more information related to COVID-19 vaccinations.

### [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

This website, developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the White House, provides information related to COVID-19 symptoms, testing locations, vaccinations, and other frequently asked questions.

### [Medicare and Coronavirus](#)

These resources, compiled by CMS, provide information related to COVID-19 for individuals eligible for Medicare. Resources include information around protecting oneself from COVID-19 infection, vaccination availability, coping strategies, and Medicare coverage and benefits related to COVID-19.

The Medicare-Medicaid Coordination Office (MMCO) in the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) seeks to help beneficiaries dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid have access to seamless, high-quality health care that includes the full range of covered services in both programs. This tip sheet is intended to support health plans and providers in integrating and coordinating care for dually eligible beneficiaries. It does not convey current or anticipated health plan or provider requirements. For additional information, please go to <https://www.resourcesforintegratedcare.com/>. Please submit feedback to [RIC@lewin.com](mailto:RIC@lewin.com).

<sup>1</sup> CDC. (2022). Flu & People 65 Years and Older. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/highrisk/65over.htm#:~:text=Flu%20vaccination%20is%20especially%20important,flu%20and%20from%20COVID%2D19.&text=it%20has%20been%20recognized%20for,compared%20with%20young%2C%20healthy%20adults.>

<sup>2</sup> National Foundation for Infectious Diseases. (n.d.). Flu and Adults with Chronic Health Conditions. Retrieved from [https://www.nfid.org/infectious-diseases/flu-and-adults-with-chronic-health-conditions/#:~:text=Influenza%20\(flu\)%20is%20a%20contagious,chronic%20conditions%20are%20well%2Dcontrolled.](https://www.nfid.org/infectious-diseases/flu-and-adults-with-chronic-health-conditions/#:~:text=Influenza%20(flu)%20is%20a%20contagious,chronic%20conditions%20are%20well%2Dcontrolled.)

<sup>3</sup> CDC. (2022). *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) – People with Certain Medical Conditions*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>.

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- <sup>5</sup>Infectious Disease Society of America. (2019). *Studies Show Flu Vaccine Reduces Rise of Hospitalization in Children and Death in Adults: National Flu Surveillance Research*. Retrieved from <https://www.idsociety.org/news--publications-new/articles/2019/studies-show-flu-vaccine-reduces-risk-of-hospitalization-in-children-and-death-in-adults/>.
- <sup>6</sup>Jaklevic, M. (2020). Flu Vaccination Urged During COVID-19 Pandemic. *JAMA Network* 32(10):926-927. Retrieved from <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2769836>.
- <sup>7</sup>Walker, M. (2020, August 20). CDC: COVID-19 Patients Should Delay Flu Shots. *MedPage Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.medpagetoday.com/infectiousdisease/covid19/88192>.
- <sup>8</sup>CDC. (2022). Similarities and Differences between Flu and COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm>.
- <sup>9</sup>CDC. (2021). The Flu Season. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/flu-season.htm#:~:text=In%20the%20United%20States%2C%20flu%20season%20occurs%20in%20the%20fall,last%20as%20late%20as%20May>.