



**To all New York State Office of Mental Health Operated Psychiatric Centers
and
Article 31 Licensed “Free Standing” Psychiatric Hospitals**

HEALTH ALERT
2013- 2014 FLU SEASON

The New York State Office of Mental Health is following the lead of the New York State Department of Health’s (DOH) 2013-2014 Influenza Season Public Health Campaign. Inspired by the national Health People 2020 goal, which seeks to achieve an immunization rate for healthcare personnel in excess of 90%, the goal of this Campaign is to reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with influenza for patients, families and healthcare personnel. Influenza vaccination is the most effective means to prevent influenza.

I. Department of Health (DOH) facilities:

DOH has issued regulations applicable to entities that it licenses under the Public Health Law. All facilities that fall under DOH’s jurisdiction, **including dually licensed Article 28/31 providers**, must comply with the new regulations. This includes general hospitals, nursing homes, diagnostic and treatment centers, certified home health agencies, long term home health care programs, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) home care programs, licensed home care service agencies, limited licensed home care service agencies and hospices (i.e., entities licensed by DOH under Public Health Law, Articles 28, 36 and 40).

Under these regulations, during the 2013-2014 influenza season, all healthcare personnel who are not vaccinated against influenza will be required to wear a surgical or procedure mask (which must be provided to such personnel free of charge) while working in areas where patients are typically present. “Healthcare personnel” are defined as all persons employed or affiliated with a healthcare or residential facility or agency, whether paid or unpaid, including but not limited to employees, members of the medical and nursing staff, contract staff, students, and volunteers, who engage in activities such that if they were infected with influenza, they could potentially expose patients or residents to the disease.

The public health aim of these regulations is to reduce influenza transmission from health care personnel through influenza vaccination or, for those personnel who are not vaccinated, by wearing a mask. The DOH regulations can be found at:

http://www.health.ny.gov/regulations/recently_adopted/docs/2013-07-31_prevention_of_influenza_transmission_by_healthcare_and_residential_facility_and_agency_personnel.pdf

DOH has also published an extensive FAQ section on this subject on its website:

http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/influenza/seasonal/providers/prevention_of_influenza_transmission/docs/faq_flu_mask_requirements.pdf

II. Office of Mental Health (OMH) facilities:

This alert reflects requirements that will soon be codified in OMH emergency regulations applicable to *certain* facilities under its jurisdiction. The OMH regulations apply to ***OMH-operated psychiatric centers (including all programs and services operated by, or under the auspices of such psychiatric centers) and “free standing” Article 31 psychiatric hospitals.*** They do not apply to psychiatric units of Article 28 hospitals, which are subject to the DOH regulations described above. The OMH regulations have the same goal as the DOH regulations: to optimize patient and staff wellness in these facilities.

The OMH regulations require OMH-operated psychiatric centers and Article 31 freestanding psychiatric hospitals to ensure that all personnel who have not been vaccinated against influenza for the current influenza season, wear a surgical or procedure mask (which must be provided to such personnel free of charge) while in areas where patients may be present. The term “personnel” includes all persons employed or affiliated with a State-operated psychiatric center (including all programs and services operated by or under the auspices of such psychiatric center) or Article 31 licensed inpatient facility, whether paid or unpaid, including but not limited to employees, members of the medical, nursing, and other treatment staff, contract staff, students, and volunteers, who engage in activities such that if they were infected with influenza, they could potentially expose patients to the disease.

Consistent with the process established in the DOH regulations, OMH-operated facilities and Article 31 freestanding psychiatric hospitals must document the influenza status of all personnel. This documentation must include the name and address of the individual who ordered or administered the vaccine and the date of vaccination.

These requirements will remain in effect for the “influenza season,” i.e., the period of time during which influenza is prevalent, as determined by the Commissioner of Health. The emergency regulations will soon be published on OMH’s public website, upon filing with the Department of State, at: www.omh.ny.gov.

III. Advisory For All Providers Licensed or Operated by OMH:

OMH strongly urges all providers licensed, operated or funded by OMH to pursue flu immunization for their personnel and to aggressively pursue the prevention behaviors noted below.

Practical Ways That All Individuals Can Do Their Part To Prevent The Spread of Influenza

What can I do to prevent the flu?

- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water. Alcohol-based hand cleansers are also effective.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Stay home from work or school if you are sick.
- Use a tissue when you cough, sneeze or spit, and dispose of the tissue in a covered trash bin.
- If you are unable to use a tissue, your arm (elbow) is the next best thing to prevent using your hand to cover your cough or sneeze and spreading the germs.
- Clean shared space more often, such as phone receivers, keyboards, steering wheels and office equipment.
- The influenza vaccine will provide added protection.

How is the flu spread?

The flu virus is spread from person to person when you inhale droplets in the air that contain the flu virus, or through direct hand contact with respiratory secretions or surfaces contaminated with respiratory secretions containing flu virus. Flu virus on your hands can be readily transferred to your mouth, nose or eyes leading to infection. The flu typically sweeps through large groups of people who spend time in close contact, such as school classrooms, college dormitories, military barracks, offices, and nursing homes. Flu symptoms include fever, cough, runny nose, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. If you get these symptoms, stay home and limit contact with others until at least 24 hours after your fever has subsided without the use of medicine. Most people can recover from the flu at home without need for medical treatment. However, if you are at high risk for complications of flu, such as having a chronic health condition, contact your doctor if you start to feel ill.