

ACTION BRIEF

Employer Strategies that Drive Value



NCBGH

NORTH CAROLINA BUSINESS GROUP ON HEALTH

HIGH-VALUE PREVENTIVE CARE DURING COVID-19

SPECIAL FOCUS ON IMMUNIZATIONS

ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS:

1. Plan specific activities to promote and provide access to and coverage for immunizations.
2. Ensure that health plans and employee wellbeing partners conduct proactive outreach to fill immunization gaps.
3. Educate and involve employees.

“As the country is navigating the multitude of highly troubling issues caused by COVID-19 and bracing for a ‘second wave’ coinciding with the flu season, now is the time for employers to communicate the importance of employees and their families focusing on prevention—including flu shot—and re-engaging with primary care.”

—Michael Thompson, President & CEO, National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions

As the pandemic took hold, providers deferred elective and preventive care services in an effort to limit virus transmission. Many months into the health crisis, too many Americans have remained hesitant to interact with providers for fear of contracting the virus from healthcare workers or other patients. The cumulative impact has been significant.

Telehealth has filled gaps where possible, but essential preventive care—including immunizations, chronic care management, screenings, and certain treatments and procedures—require in-person visits. The data clearly show that routine preventive care has been delayed or skipped. For example:

- ▶ For the week of May 11, 2020, non-influenza immunizations dropped 30.1% from the same week last year. The largest drop, 60.5%, was experienced by the 19–49 age group, a prime working-age group.¹



- ▶ For high cholesterol and diabetes management, testing rates fell 81%–90% and new medication therapy fell 52%–60% during February and March 2020.²
- ▶ Between March 15 and June 16, 2020, screenings decreased 63% for breast cancer, 64% for colon cancer, and 67% for cervical cancer from historical levels.³

EMPLOYER PREVENTIVE CARE STRATEGY AREAS



Vaccinations



Screenings (e.g., cancer, depression/ anxiety, sexually transmitted infections)



Tests (e.g., blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol)



Behavioral intervention (e.g., tobacco cessation, substance use, weight loss)



Routine physicals and routine care for those with chronic or serious conditions



Prenatal care

The possible implications are considerable, including outbreaks from vaccine-preventable diseases; complications—and deaths—from uncontrolled chronic conditions; and missed opportunities to provide timely care for patients with cancer and other serious diseases. Delayed screenings and preventive care can lead to downstream complications and an increased vulnerability to severe illness if COVID-19 is contracted.



FAST FACT

In August of 2020, The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) authorized state-licensed pharmacists to order and administer pediatric vaccines for ages 3-18 during the pandemic. Learn more [here](#).

ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

1. Plan specific activities over the next several months to promote and provide access to and coverage for immunizations.

- ▶ Remind employees about their immunization benefits, including in-network options. Employees may not know that recommended immunizations are covered at 100% under most plan designs. In addition to clinics, promote alternative settings that are available for certain vaccinations (e.g., influenza, shingles, pneumococcal pneumonia), such as pharmacies, urgent care centers, and worksite health clinics.

- ▶ Offer worksite flu shot clinics.

Even during the pandemic, it is possible to offer safe worksite flu shot clinics. The CDC recommends curbside, drive-through clinics similar to COVID-19 drive-through testing or onsite/worksite health clinics where masks and social distancing are required.

Ensure that your flu shot vendor is following CDC guidelines, including screening for COVID-19 and other health symptoms and allowing sufficient time to monitor for adverse vaccine reactions.

- ▶ Provide vouchers to community options.

If worksite flu shot clinics are not possible, offer vouchers to community

“The decrease in pediatric visits and immunizations also matters to employers because parents will miss a significant number of workdays to care for children with serious vaccine-preventable diseases. Parents need to be reminded that it is critical to catch up on delayed pediatric vaccines as quickly as possible to protect their children, especially as social distancing becomes an even greater challenge when children return to school, sports and other activities. Fortunately, healthcare delivery systems are doing great work in making preventive care visits safe.”

— Ray Fabius, M.D., President of HealthNEXT and member of the [National Alliance Medical Director Advisory Council](#)

Why Employers Should Care

According to the CDC, vaccine-preventable diseases that impact adults include:

Influenza

- ▶ Direct influenza-related medical costs based on outpatient visits, emergency department visits, and hospitalizations are estimated to total [\\$3.2 billion](#) in the US each year.
- ▶ Adults diagnosed with flu also lost an average of 3.7–5.9 days of work, amounting to [\\$8 billion](#) in indirect costs.

Pneumococcal pneumonia

- ▶ The [CDC](#) estimates that about 320,000 people get pneumococcal pneumonia every year, leading to more than 150,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.
- ▶ According to a study using the [Truven Health MarketScan](#) commercial claim

database, approximately 17% of adults 19–64 years of age were at risk for pneumococcal disease, with risks much higher and costs nearly double for those with two or more medical conditions.

Chronic hepatitis B

- ▶ According to the CDC, up to 1.4 million people suffer from chronic hepatitis B, with complications such as liver cancer.
- ▶ The Hepatitis B Foundation estimates that approximately 5%–10% of adults, 30%–50% of children, and 90% of newborns will develop chronic hepatitis B.
- ▶ Adults who have certain chronic conditions, such as diabetes, renal disease, chronic liver disease, and HIV

infection should receive the HepB vaccine, according to the CDC.

Human papillomavirus infection (HPV)

- ▶ HPV [has been reported](#) to account for approximately 70% of cervical cancer, 70% of anal cancer, 30% of vaginal and vulvar cancers, and over 90% of anogenital warts.
- ▶ At least [\\$4 billion annually](#) in medical spending addresses HPV-related cervical cancer and genital warts.
- ▶ HPV vaccination is recommended starting at age 12 through age 26 and for adults ages 27–45 based on physician recommendation.

Learn more about these and other vaccine-preventable diseases [here](#).

providers that may fall outside your health benefit network such as pharmacies, grocery stores, urgent care clinics, and other settings. Include vouchers for other adult and pediatric immunizations, as well.



2. Ensure that health plans and employee wellbeing partners conduct proactive outreach to fill immunization gaps.

Employers are encouraged to work with their health plans and other wellbeing partners to ensure that employees who have missed needed immunizations are contacted with information about the importance of, and coverage levels for, immunizations.

Immediate strategies to address the urgent need for immunization catch-up during the pandemic include:

- ▶ Incorporating immunization reminders into call-center scripts or recordings played while waiting for service.

- ▶ Identifying immunization gaps in care and reaching out to remind employees and their families of needed vaccines.
- ▶ Using health plan and wellbeing program communications to employees to highlight the need to catch up on missed immunizations.
- ▶ Explicitly addressing condition-specific recommended immunizations in disease management programs, especially for those who are at high risk for severe illness if they contract COVID-19 (such as those with diabetes, vascular disease, and other chronic conditions).

In the longer-term, employers can work with health plans to increase vaccination rates through efforts to:

- ▶ Offer value-based incentives for providers who improve vaccination rates among their patients.
- ▶ Partner with providers to ensure vaccines are recommended during office visits and resources are available to increase vaccine administration. Support your providers with a simple claims-submission process to ensure timely reimbursement.
- ▶ Identify immunization disparities by reviewing adult immunization status during transitions of care.
- ▶ Include immunization screenings and education through open enrollment, wellness programs, and disease management programs.
- ▶ Tailor strategies to reach underserved communities.

“As public health officials look to fall and winter, the specter of a new surge of COVID-19 gives them chills. But there is a scenario they dread even more: A severe flu season, resulting in a ‘twindemic.’ Even a mild flu season could stagger hospitals already coping with COVID-19 cases.”

—The New York Times, August 16, 2020



- ▶ Increase communication and education to encourage members to receive appropriate vaccines, using mail, email, text messages, and phone calls to remind members when vaccines are due.



Immunization Disparities Expected to Worsen During the Pandemic

Disparities in access to and utilization of vaccines have presented long-standing challenges. For example, non-Hispanic White adults are twice as likely as non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic adults to receive a shingles vaccine.

Research also shows that adults with a lower level of education and household income are less likely to receive a flu vaccine.

Communities of color, immigrant populations, those who live in crowded inner cities and/or congregant housing, and families without a car face the greatest health risks.

By removing financial and access barriers to flu shots and other vaccines for all employees, employers send a strong message about the importance of immunizations.

3. Educate and involve employees.

All preventive care is of heightened importance during the pandemic. Remind employees of their preventive care and wellbeing benefits so they can remain healthy and ease pressure on the healthcare system during this turbulent time.

Consider these employee outreach strategies:

- ▶ Catch the attention of employees by sharing information about the significant decrease in immunization rates during COVID-19—and the potential negative results.
- ▶ Highlight immunizations that provide added protection against severe illness if COVID-19 is contracted, such as influenza and pneumococcal pneumonia. Include information about who should get these immunizations.

- ▶ Remind parents to catch up on missed immunizations for their children to protect them from vaccine-preventable diseases, especially as social distancing requirements are relaxed.
- ▶ Use the research identifying immunization disparities, which are expected to worsen during the pandemic, to tailor communications and outreach.

- ▶ Remind employees and their families that they can safely receive preventive care during the pandemic. This helpful resource from the National Alliance—available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)—can dispel COVID-19 myths and memes.

The National Alliance has a one-page, customizable *Action Brief for Employees* on immunizations and preventive care available [here](#).

Amid overwhelmed US healthcare systems and fears of contracting COVID-19, routine vaccination rates fell alarmingly across all populations in the US, with demand plunging as much as 95% for certain vaccines.



RESOURCES FOR EMPLOYERS:

- [NCQA Act on the Facts: Immunizations](#)
- [CDC: Vaccination Guidance During a Pandemic](#)
- [Guidance for Planning Vaccination Clinics Held at Satellite, Temporary, or Off-site Locations](#)
- [Vaccination Tools and Resources for Employers](#)
- [Vaccinations Have Sharply Declined During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [How to Increase Flu Vaccination During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [The 2020 Flu Shot is More Important than Ever, Experts Say](#)
- [WHO and Unicef Warn of a Decline in Vaccinations During COVID-19](#)
- [CDC: Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Routine Pediatric Vaccine Ordering and Administration](#)
- [CDC on flu vaccination](#)
- [The 7 benefits of flu vaccination](#)

Immunization Schedules Will Clear Up Confusion

- ▶ [Adult Immunization Schedule for Ages 19 Years or Older, United States, 2020](#)
- ▶ [Childhood and Adolescent Immunization Schedule for Ages 18 Years or Younger, United States 2020](#)

NOTES

- 1 Filler W, Malone Y. 2019 to 2020 Decline in Administered Immunizations Across the Lifespan Due to COVID ambulatory care and public health visit reductions. VaxCare. 2020.
- 2 Wright, A., Salazar, A., Mirica, M. et. Al. The Invisible Epidemic: Neglected Chronic Disease Management During COVID-19. *J GEN INTERN MED* 35, 2816-2817 (2020).
- 3 Mast, Christopher, Alejandro Munoz. Delayed Cancer Screenings – a Second Look

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Driving Innovation, Health and Value

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