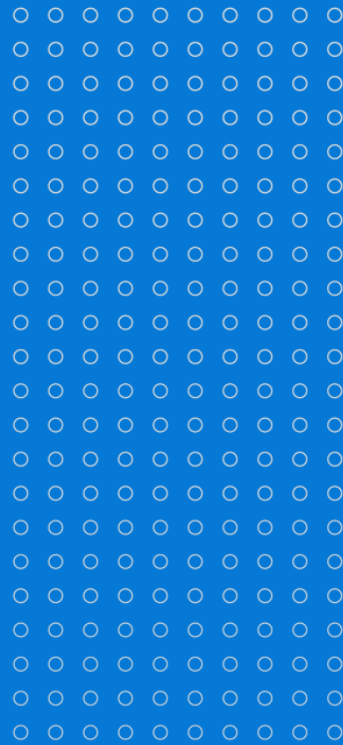


Beyond COVID-19: Vaccines and the Workplace

Integrating COVID-19 Vaccines into Corporate Wellness Strategy

Canadian Edition

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Canada's independent authorization process is recognized around the world for its high standards and rigorous review. The approval of the Pfizer-BioNtech COVID-19 vaccine (for people 16 years and older), Moderna Covid-19 vaccine, Astra Zeneca Covid-19 vaccine and the Janssen Covid-19 vaccines (for people 18 years and older) are supported by evidence that they are safe, effective and of good quality¹. Although the widespread distribution of these vaccines is underway, herd immunity however, may be months away, so it is very important for organizations to integrate the COVID-19 vaccine into their workplace wellness strategy without delay.

Here are some questions and answers addressing the COVID vaccines' impact on wellness strategies — and how to best integrate a vaccine program into your organization.

What does the COVID vaccine have to do with workplace wellness? The COVID-19 vaccine will play a primary role in prevention. Early prevention and detection are critical to keeping employees healthy and at work, and these are foundations of a holistic workplace wellbeing strategy. As employers begin to determine the role a COVID vaccine plays in their overall COVID strategy, the most similar comparison we can make is to how flu vaccines are currently used in the workplace. In fact, much of the written guidance regarding use of the COVID vaccine in the workplace is based off guidance provided around flu vaccinations, which have been an integral part of employer prevention strategies for many years.

The upside, if there is one, is that employers and employees may become much more interested in preventative vaccines. COVID-19 is a systemic respiratory disease, meaning it can affect other organs if you have underlying health conditions, much like the flu and pneumonia, and they each can be costly and deadly. Vaccination is the number one medical intervention in the world for saving lives. COVID-19 is a powerful reminder of that. Given the attention and respect afforded COVID-19 immunization right now, looking at your health benefit plans to identify gaps in coverage for other preventative immunizations is a smart and strategic move.²

Does this mean employees who are vaccinated no longer need to mask? A best practice wellbeing strategy is long-term and ever evolving, and your COVID-19 strategy should follow suit. Clinical trial results are very promising, but experts agree that until the efficacy of the vaccine is proven in the real world — and a significant portion of the population has been vaccinated — social distancing, handwashing, mask-wearing, disinfecting, screening and testing will all continue to play integral roles in employer prevention and safety protocols for the near future.

As part of an employer sponsored wellness program, can employers require the COVID vaccine? Without specific guidance from Health Canada, we are unable to know exactly how administration of the vaccine will fit into in a formal wellness program. It is important, however, to distinguish between employers that will **require** employees

to receive COVID vaccines, versus **voluntary** wellness programming. In general, under certain circumstances employers may require employees to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

Employers will continue to be responsible for a safe work environment, even lacking the power to mandate employee vaccinations. According to federal and provincial government officials, the coronavirus vaccination will be voluntary. It's important to understand, however, that employers have a responsibility to maintain a safe workplace and reduce the risk of transmission. If found liable, they could face stiff fines under workplace health and safety and emergency measures legislation.³

Will flu vaccination vendors be administering COVID vaccines onsite? We are following the National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) guidelines (as of May 3, 2021) acknowledging that the general public's access is following prioritization of initial doses of COVID-19 vaccine(s) in three stages, through public health agencies and pharmacies.⁴ We are in contact with the largest national providers of screenings and vaccinations, who have responded that it is too soon to know exactly what will be widely available or when to employers. Working with public health units, business groups and large employers, we anticipate long-term we will see onsite COVID-19 vaccination clinics set up like flu clinics on worksites as is now the case with a number of large employers in Ontario and Alberta. However, we are seeing COVID-19 Rapid Screening clinics being offered now. We will continue to keep a close eye on this so reach out to your HUB Employee Benefits consultant for information if you are interested.

As we look back on 2020, is there anything employers might have done differently with their wellness strategies to help reduce the impact of COVID on their population? COVID-19 spotlighted the critical health issues some employers have attempted to address through their wellness programs for many years. Obesity and diabetes are two of the leading co-morbidities researchers have identified as exacerbating COVID-19 acuity and mortality. Inpatient hospital admission data points directly to employees with obesity (BMI >30 kg/m²) and/or diabetes, as leading indicators of COVID illness severity. According to Diabetes Canada, studies have shown that diabetes is one of the major comorbidities associated with the development of severe COVID-19-related adverse outcomes and mortality, and people living with diabetes who contract COVID-19 are at higher risk of developing adult respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), pneumonia, excessive uncontrolled inflammation responses, and hypercoagulable state. Furthermore, the odds of in-hospital death from COVID-19 is 2.85 times higher in people living with diabetes compared to patients without diabetes.⁵

COVID-19 patients who are obese, diabetic, or both stay in the hospital longer and have a higher morbidity rate in comparison to healthier counterparts. Effective diabetes management and weight management programs could help mitigate the severity of cases in the population, reducing absences, leaves, health plan costs and even life insurance claims for employers. HUB uses a data analytics engine to identify higher risk populations and can support employers in making data-driven decisions to implement targeted programs.

How should employers handle the mental health component of the vaccine?

Though there is much excitement in anticipation of a vaccine, it is certainly mixed with anxiety or fear for some. One way workplaces can improve employee mental health is to help them feel safe from COVID-19 when at work. According to a study in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, people who felt entirely unprotected at work had even worse mental health than those who lost their jobs since the start of the pandemic.⁶

Employees may ask if the shot will hurt, if they'll get COVID-19 symptoms as a result, and if they can suffer long-term side effects. Acknowledge your employees' fears and offer them information and support. Leadership should provide guidance for employees to help them navigate available resources. Clinical information is readily available through HUB from Health Canada and Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) that can be shared with employees as part of a comprehensive and credible communication campaign. This will establish appropriate expectations and help alleviate employees' fears, thus encouraging maximum uptake of the vaccine.

We also strongly encourage employers to promote their mental health resources, including benefits provided through their health plan or employee assistance programs (EAPs), through HUB and other sources through wellness programs. There are also many free and publicly available resources. A workplace mental health strategy that includes resiliency training for everyone, education for leaders to enable them to identify and support employees who may be struggling and normalizing the conversation around mental health to reduce stigma should be key considerations.

A final note: Push forward with programs that promote and support self-care. Holistic self-care practices including exercise, healthy eating, proper sleep, and stress-management can add to the mental resiliency needed through this evolving situation and beyond.

What if we don't have a focused workplace wellness strategy and initiatives? It's never too late to start. If you don't have a program today, it's likely because it hasn't been made a corporate priority. If there's one thing COVID-19 has highlighted, it's the need for a focused employee health and wellness strategy and initiatives. Start with building awareness of key health risks and promoting current tools and resources you already have in place.

Focus on the entire "Continuum of Health" — prevention, intervention, and recovery, providing a comprehensive viewpoint to ensure all dimensions of well-being are considered within your health strategy. For COVID-19, leverage health plan offerings, employee assistance programs (EAP) and carrier tools.

Work with your HUB benefit advisors, risk managers and Health and Performance consultants to determine the "why" behind some of your population's risk using medical, pharmacy, worker compensation and biometric data. Assessing employee needs and interests is also key in developing an effective wellbeing strategy.

Finally, consider long-term strategies that address key areas of wellbeing for both the individual and your business — physical, mental, financial, and organizational — to create a supportive and sustainable workplace environment that prioritizes holistic wellbeing for everyone.

1. Government of Canada Recommendations on the use of COVID-19, <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/recommendations-use-covid-19-vaccines.html>
2. Sanofi Canada, *Sanofi Canada Healthcare Survey 2020*, June 18, 2020.
3. Benefits Canada, *Sounding Board: Employers playing a key role in vaccination efforts*, February 4, 2021.
4. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/guidance-prioritization-initial-doses-covid-19-vaccines.html>
5. Diabetes Canada, *Relationship between Diabetes and COVID-19*, September 2020.
6. The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, *The Association between the Perceived Adequacy of Workplace Infection Control Procedures and Personal Protective Equipment with Mental Health Symptoms: A Cross-sectional Survey of Canadian Health-care Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, September 21, 2020.

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