You are all too aware of how illness can have a devastating effect on your employees and organization. As one of the most contagious diseases, influenza, for example, can force an employee to go off work for days and is a major cause of absenteeism. For older employees and those with weakened immune systems, the flu can even be life-threatening. Vaccination is often the first line of defence against illness. By offering vaccine coverage, you give your employees the option of reducing their chances of getting sick. But with all the vaccines available, which products should you cover? That depends on your company’s goals, according to medical experts. If many of your employees travel to exotic destinations on business, it may be wise to offer them coverage for certain travel vaccines. If you’re an organization promoting health and safety, you may want to offer coverage for a whole bag of vaccines—to send a consistent corporate message.

Working Well spoke with Drs. Stephen Shafran and Arif Bhimji to help you weigh the pros and cons of covering vaccinations for three common and preventable illnesses—influenza, hepatitis B and hepatitis A. Keep reading to find out whether your organization would benefit from adding these vaccines to its drug plan.

Influenza

What is it? Influenza is a common respiratory infection, caused by the influenza virus, affecting an estimated 10-25% of Canadians every year, according to Health Canada. Recovery can take a week to 10 days,
Needle naysayers

Most people recognize the benefits of vaccines. But some question their safety and efficacy and are reluctant to get immunized. Here are some common misconceptions and fears:

- **“I feel fine/I never get sick”**
  If a person feels fine, they may see vaccination as unnecessary.

- **“I may get the disease from the vaccine”**
  Some people fear they can get the disease from the vaccine itself.

- **“I don’t like putting chemicals in my body”**
  There are people who view vaccines as harmful and prefer an alternative or homeopathic approach.

- **“There are dangerous side effects”**
  Serious reactions to vaccines are rare. The risk of developing a serious reaction to a vaccine is far less than the risk of contracting a disease because of failing to get vaccinated.

  The debate over a link between childhood vaccinations and autism continues, although no scientific evidence supporting such a link currently exists.

- **“I can still get the disease even if I’m vaccinated”**
  No vaccine is 100% effective, but the majority of vaccinated people develop immunity.

- **“I’m afraid of needles”**
  People may decline vaccination for fear of needles. While this isn’t a significant factor, healthcare practitioners should be aware of it and be prepared to spend extra time explaining the benefits of vaccination to needle-phobic patients.

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professor and director of infectious diseases, department of medicine, University of Alberta in Edmonton. Infected mothers may also benefit from extended family coverage for the vaccine by allowing them to immunize their newborns. The (U.S.) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that for every one million adults vaccinated, US$100 million is saved in future, direct medical costs.

What does it cost? Around $100 for a series of shots.

Hepatitis A

What is it? Also a liver disease, the hepatitis A virus (HAV) is transmitted by ingesting food or liquid contaminated by human or animal waste and exposure to contaminated blood. Improper food handling, poor personal hygiene and poor sanitation practices are often sources of the virus. High-risk groups include gay men, people with liver disease, residents of communities with high rates or repeated outbreaks of HAV, members of the Canadian Armed Forces, animal handlers and international travellers, especially to Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Fortunately the number of HAV cases has dropped dramatically in Canada—from 3,562 in 1991 to 396 in 2003, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada. Vaccines are available to prevent both short-term and long-term infection.

Does government cover it? No.

Should you cover it? Employers should conduct a health risk assessment of their workforce to determine whether it’s appropriate to offer this vaccine. Coverage may be beneficial for food service workers. “It’s something to consider if you are an employer and you don’t want to [be sued by] people getting hepatitis A in your restaurant,” says Dr. Shafran.

What does it cost? A hefty $40 to $50 per dose. Two doses are needed, six to 18 months apart.

As with any workplace health initiative, deciding which vaccines to cover is a matter of weighing the costs against the benefits. Conducting a health risk assessment of your employee population is an integral part of this process. Despite the costs, offering your employees coverage for vaccines is probably a good idea if you’re an organization promoting wellness—it shows you’re being consistent with your corporate message. Says Dr. Bhimji: “It comes down to money and how benevolent, for lack of a better term, a company wants to be.”

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Online resources
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov
Health Canada www.hc-sc.gc.ca

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