



Joint position statement: Amendment to COVID-19 vaccination policy

February 21, 2024

Introduction:

When the COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination Protocol in High-Risk Settings was withdrawn in May of 2023, NS Health and IWK Health maintained the requirement for a primary COVID-19 vaccine series as a condition of employment for employees, preferred candidates and on-site medical staff. At that time, a review of available evidence demonstrated that the most durable protection against COVID-19 infection and re-infection was conferred by hybrid immunity – two or more doses of COVID-19 vaccine plus natural infection. The degree of protection offered by hybrid immunity against currently circulating Omicron sub-variants was not yet known.

In response to evolving evidence regarding COVID-19, Omicron sub-variants, protection from vaccine and a review of vaccination policies across other jurisdictions, Nova Scotia Health's Emerging & Re-emerging Infections Network (ERIN), which includes representation from IWK Health, reviewed existing COVID-19 Immunization policies in place for both organizations. Based on the current available evidence, Nova Scotia Health and IWK Health are amending their respective policies.

Effective February 26, 2024, it will no longer be a requirement for employees, preferred candidates and on-site medical staff to submit proof of primary series COVID-19 immunization.

This change reflects our commitment to respecting the choices and autonomy of our staff members while also considering the evolving landscape of COVID-19 in its endemic phase. We acknowledge that vaccination against COVID-19 remains highly effective for the prevention of severe disease, hospitalization, and death, and protection is meaningfully improved by the receipt of a booster dose. We strongly encourage all eligible individuals, especially health care workers, who are caring for our provinces most vulnerable population to receive the vaccine and continue to follow vaccination guidelines provided.

Nova Scotia Health & IWK Health Position:

By removing the mandatory vaccination requirement, both organizations aim to offer flexibility and support to employees, on-site medical staff, and preferred candidates. Staff members who chose not to receive vaccines or submit proof of immunization, when the policy was implemented, may have the opportunity to return to active employment. On-site medical staff who chose not to receive vaccines or submit proof of immunization will be eligible to apply for onsite medical privileges with Nova Scotia Health and IWK Health, provided they meet all other necessary job requirements. Each organization will be reaching out to individuals on administrative leave to discuss their situation and options for return to active employment.

We remain committed to maintaining a safe workplace and providing high-quality care to our patients. The Respiratory Virus Safety Plan and Masking Guidance, established in collaboration with Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) and Occupational Health Safety & Wellness (OHSW), will continue to be strictly enforced. These measures include testing, PPE requirements, adherence to IPAC and OHSW protocols and screening.

The Emerging & Re-emerging Infections Network will continue to actively monitor the situation and adapt organizational policies and practices as necessary to ensure the wellbeing of our employees, patients and the community at large.

We appreciate the continued dedication and commitment of our staff members during these challenging times. Their professionalism and expertise are vital in providing exceptional healthcare services to Nova Scotians.

We encourage Nova Scotia Health or IWK Health employees to reach out to your manager to discuss any supports and resources you may need to assist with your transition back to the workplace.