**

**Frequently Asked Questions: Vaccination Mandate**

*This FAQ has been developed by clinical and operational staff in response to questions received.*

***We are sharing with all employees regardless of vaccination status****, as it is meant to help you understand our organizational approach to mandating the COVID-19 vaccine. As of this writing, about 85% of Southcoast employees are vaccinated.*

*It is Southcoast’s intent to partner with staff and provide educational opportunities and accurate data to promote an informed decision regarding vaccination. While the approach will be firm, Southcoast will give employees a reasonable amount of time to comply with the vaccination mandate so that our patients, colleagues, community and loved ones remain safe from the unyielding COVID pandemic.*

*Thank you.*

**Q. Why is Southcoast mandating COVID vaccinations for its employees?**

A. As explained in [Keith Hovan’s letter](https://www.southcoast.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Southcoast-COVID-Vaccination-Letter.pdf) dated July 14, 2021, Southcoast Health is requiring employee COVID-19 vaccination to protect the health of our providers and staff, patients, visitors and community. Much thought and deliberation went into this decision and Southcoast Health has decided to join many other leading healthcare systems across the state in this requirement. Due to the timing and ongoing threats of new variants, vaccination will help keep our community safe and on track for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Q. How do I get a vaccine?**

A. If you have not already received your COVID-19 vaccine, Southcoast Health will provide vaccines for free at several local clinics or through the Mobile Wellness Van. Please refer to the schedule on the Southcoast Intranet or internet site (<https://www.southcoast.org/covid-19-vaccination/>) to find information on how to obtain your vaccination at Southcoast. If more convenient, you may also obtain vaccination at a site outside of Southcoast.

**Q. What should I do if I’m still unsure about getting the COVID vaccine?**

A. Speak to your healthcare provider, attend an upcoming virtual COVID Vaccination Education Forum in which Southcoast providers will educate our employees on the COVID vaccine and answer their questions, and/or view the video of [Dr. Correia](https://vimeo.com/591227500/f2f96b4fe9) addressing vaccine hesitancy. Southcoast’s virtual COVID Vaccination Education Forums are scheduled as follows:

* Wednesday, 9/15 at 4:30 p.m.
* Friday, 9/17 at 7:30 a.m.
* Tuesday, 9/21 at 12:00 p.m.
* Thursday, 9/23 at 4:30 p.m.

To register for a session, please go to [LEARNMore](https://lsglm700.learnsoft.com/LSGLMAuth/Home/LBLogin?cid=94&idp=Microsoft), which can be found on Southcoast’s intranet. Once in LEARNMore, please search for Covid Education Sessions to Register for the available sessions.

**Q. Why was I sent a link to attest to my vaccination status?**

A. Employees for whom we had no vaccination information on file with Employee Health were sent an [attestation link](https://www.southcoast.org/covid-19-employee-verification/) so that the employee could update Southcoast on their vaccination status. We recognize that there have been many options for vaccinations outside of Southcoast and therefore, we are using the information in the attestation to update employee health records.

**Q. Can I still submit my attestation?**

A. The deadline to return the attestation was September 10. If you were sent an attestation link and have not yet completed it, we ask that you do so now at <https://www.southcoast.org/covid-19-employee-verification/>. This information is important, and we want to be sure our files are as up to date as possible. If you have questions regarding the attestation, please contact your supervisor or HR Business Partner.

**Q.**  **I have completed the COVID vaccine attestation that was sent to me and indicated that I am not willing to be vaccinated. What will happen next?**

A. Your manager will discuss the matter with you and ask you to attend an upcoming COVID Vaccination Education Forum, where Southcoast providers will educate our employees about the importance of receiving the COVID vaccine and answer any questions that you might have. (Please see the available times above and register ASAP for a COVID vaccination education session.) Southcoast’s goal is to educate our employees so that you are comfortable receiving the vaccine and will provide employees with a reasonable amount of time to obtain the vaccine. Any employee who remains unvaccinated and does not apply and/or obtain approval for a religious or medical exemption will be subject to corrective action, up to and including termination, for non-compliance with Southcoast’s COVID vaccine mandate.

**Q.** **Who will be notified of my vaccination status?**

A. Your direct leadership will be notified in confidence so that they may assist you, if not vaccinated, in attending an upcoming virtual COVID vaccination education session and support you in practicing all required safety protocols and restrictions.

**Q. If I work remotely, why do I need to be vaccinated?**

A. The COVID vaccine mandate is a system-wide policy that applies to all employees regardless of work location. Remote workers are expected to work onsite at a Southcoast facility whenever needed for meetings, etc., and thus will be held to the same safety standards as the rest of our onsite workers.

**Q.** **When will I be able to request a medical or religious exemption?**

A. A formal process that will enable employees to apply for an exemption in a standardized manner is being finalized. We anticipate that notification to employees regarding the exemption application process will occur in the next few weeks.

**Q.** **What can I expect regarding the vaccination exemption process?**

A. The medical and religious exemption process will follow similar but discreet processes. Employees will be asked for documentation to be submitted with either the religious or medical exemption application and the application review process will be more rigorous than it was during the flu vaccine mandate last season.

**Q.** **What will happen if my application for exemption is approved?**

A. All individuals who receive an exemption and do not receive the COVID-19 vaccine will be expected to follow health and safety guidelines as promulgated by the CDC, Massachusetts Department of Public Health and Rhode Island Department of Health for unvaccinated individuals. You will need to follow all required safety protocols and restrictions including regular screening COVID-19 testing, mask wearing at all times when onsite at a Southcoast facility, social distancing, regular cleaning of office space/equipment, etc.

**Q.** **What will happen if my application for vaccination exemption is denied?**

A. You will continue to be highly encouraged to become further educated about the safety and importance of the COVID vaccine and to ultimately get the vaccine. Failure to do so within the established timeline once determined will result in corrective action up to and including termination of your employment for non-compliance with Southcoast’s COVID vaccination mandate.

**Q.** **What is Southcoast’s internal deadline for getting vaccinated?**

A. Southcoast has not yet established the internal deadline for compliance as we continue to focus on education and outreach. In addition, we are closely monitoring federal and state regulations (see below) to be sure we remain current. However, when the internal deadline is determined, we will inform all affected employees with advance notice.

**Q****.** **I work in a position in which a state regulation requires that I become vaccinated by a certain date (e.g., the COVID mandatory vaccination date is 10/1/21 for all staff temporarily or permanently working at a healthcare facility within Rhode Island and 10/31/21 for all Massachusetts long-term care providers and home care workers). What will happen if I don’t become vaccinated or receive an approved exemption (where applicable) by this date?**

A. Southcoast will comply with all state and federal regulations. Where possible, we will try to re-assign staff to meet patient care needs (i.e., if needed, a staff member working in a Rhode Island healthcare facility may be reassigned to work in Massachusetts temporarily). However, if re-assignment is not possible, you will no longer be scheduled to work and will be placed on an unpaid administrative leave of absence to provide you with an opportunity to become vaccinated or to request a medical or religious exemption. If you have not become vaccinated or have not been granted an exemption, after a period of time to be determined, you will be subject to the same corrective action process as all other Southcoast employees who have not complied with Southcoast’s vaccine mandate and have not been granted an exemption.

**Q.** **As an employee, what should I do if I lost my vaccination card?**

A. It depends on where you received the vaccine:

* If you received your vaccine in Massachusetts, inside or outside of a Southcoast facility, please send an email to VaccineQuestions@southcoast.org. It may take 2-3 days, but someone will work on verifying your vaccination information and issue you a new card
* If you received your vaccination in Rhode Island, please call the state of Rhode Island at 401-222-8022 for assistance

**Q.** **Will travelers/agency staff/temporary employees, volunteers and students be required to get vaccinated like employees?**

A. Yes.

**Q.** **Some hospitals and health systems are not requiring vaccination. How are they/we different?**

A. Southcoast Health makes this decision with many other leading healthcare organizations throughout the state. Patient and Employee safety remain our top priority when providing care. Southcoast will be a community leader and role model, thereby encouraging individuals to receive vaccination to protect themselves and loved ones from COVID-19.

**Q. I am having trouble uploading my vaccination card. Is there another way to accomplish this?**

A. Employees who are unable to scan and photograph their vaccination cards for [attestation](https://www.southcoast.org/covid-19-employee-verification/) upload may visit an Employee Health office at Charlton Memorial, St. Luke’s or Tobey to submit a ***photocopy of their card***. However, if you are able to use smartphone camera or scanning app to [upload a digital image with your attestation](https://www.southcoast.org/covid-19-employee-verification/), this is the preferred method.

**Q. Will I be able to choose the shot that I might be willing to get?**

A. Yes, you can choose any of the three currently approved vaccines – Johnson & Johnson (J&J), Pfizer or Moderna.

**Q. I understand the need for medical personnel to have this shot because of their proximity to the infection, but why is this mandatory for administrative/support staff that are nowhere near patients?**

A. The COVID-19 vaccine mandate is a system-wide policy that applies to all employees regardless of work location. Remote workers are expected to work onsite at a Southcoast facility whenever needed for meetings, etc., and thus will be held to the same safety standards as the rest of our onsite workers.

**Q. There are several vaccines currently recommended. Why is this one being mandated, but with some other vaccines, I have a choice of what I want and/or need for my personal health issues?**

A. To be clear, the vaccines and screenings that are required to work at Southcoast Health are as follows:

* Drug screen
* TSPOT or TB skin testing to assess for presence of active or latent TB

Immunization showing immunity or vaccination status of the following:

* Measles
* Mumps
* Rubella
* Varicella (Chicken Pox)
* Flu vaccine (between the months of October and April)
* COVID-19

The reason for this mandate is due to the extremes of the risk – both in terms of the highly contagious nature of the disease in which even an asymptomatic person can potentially spread the disease and the extreme potential effects of the virus including severe disease with long lasting complications and death.

**Q. When President Biden spoke about mandatory vaccination, he also spoke about the alternative of weekly COVID tests. Will this be offered to us?**

A. Only if you apply for and receive an exemption, pending further state and federal guidance on whether healthcare workers will be eligible for the testing alternative.

**Q.  President Biden did not make mandatory vaccination a law, correct? So why is Southcoast imposing a mandate?**

A. On September 9, President Biden’s Executive Order required all entities that receive payments from Medicare or Medicaid to require health-care workers to be vaccinated.  Southcoast Health receives 60-70% of patient care services revenue from Medicare and/or Medicaid to care for the community insured by those federally funded programs. If Southcoast were to lose that funding, we would no longer be able to care for the community we are all here to serve.

Of related interest: The White House has just unveiled guidance for federal contractors regarding the COVID-19 vaccine. Companies that do business with the federal government must mandate Covid-19 vaccines for their workforces and ensure compliance with masking and physical distancing requirements, under new White House guidance released today. The guidance from the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force was required under President Joe Biden’s Sept. 9 executive order on coronavirus safety protocols for federal contractors. That order was part of a suite of executive mandates compelling government employees and millions of health-care workers to receive a vaccine. The link to Safer Federal Workforce Task Force COVID-19 Workplace Safety: Guidance for Federal Contractors and Subcontractors is the following: <https://www.saferfederalworkforce.gov/downloads/Draft%20contractor%20guidance%20doc_20210922.pdf>.

**Q. If I received an exemption for the flu shot last year, do I need to apply for an exemption for COVID-19 or flu now?**

A. Yes. You will have to apply for a COVID-19 vaccination exemption and a FY22 flu vaccination exemption *separately*.

**Q. How many people at Southcoast have been vaccinated as opposed to unvaccinated?**

A. Nearly 85% of Southcoast’s 7,500 employees and 700 medical staff have been vaccinated as of this writing.

**Q. When a booster shot is available, will Southcoast mandate additional shots as well?**

A. Southcoast will await further guidance from the FDA and CDC before announcing additional requirements, but we will make third doses available to employees based on eligibility criteria.

**Q. Is Southcoast requiring vendors, contractors, etc., to be vaccinated against COVID-19?**

A. Southcoast will be requiring vaccination for vendors but are still trying to determine if there is an option for tracking within our RepTrax system. For now, we ask that you emphasize all existing protocols with any entrants – masking, social distancing, hand hygiene, etc.

**Q. Don’t I have natural immunity if I already had COVID-19 infection, so I do not need to get the vaccine?**

A. Natural immunity wanes several weeks to 90 days after the infection ends. Vaccination lasts for 6 months to potentially years. If you have had COVID-19, getting vaccinated has been shown to prevent re-infection and prevent severe disease.

**Q. Does the vaccine contain fetal tissue cell lines or was it used to develop the current vaccines?**

A. No. There have been false social media reports in this area that are not based on the science or medicine.

**Q. Why is there a delay in medical or religious exemption application and approval?**

A. Southcoast is being careful to first educate staff and answer questions about vaccination and then to evaluate requests for exemptions.

**Q. We have heard that the Southcoast Health Administration has told physicians not to provide any exemptions. Is that true and, if so, why would you do that?**

A. Our primary care providers quickly became overwhelmed by the number of patients and staff members who were asking to obtain exemptions. This was being requested of them prior to CDC guidance on acceptable medical exemptions and before an exemption process was put into place. We have been working on an electronic process that provides up-to-date exemption information and an electronic process that will make this easier for requests to be handled in an expeditious manner.

Of related note: The Board of Registration in Medicine issued the following guidance on 9/21/21: “Physicians who grant vaccination or mask exemptions must have a physician-patient relationship with the person who is the subject of the exemption and a legitimate medical reason supporting an exemption. A physician who grants an exemption outside the acceptable standard of care may be subject to discipline.”

**Q. Is there a risk of vaccine resistance in vaccinating most of the population as opposed to only high-risk groups?**

A. Actually, it is the reverse. By vaccinating high percentages of the population, we decrease the circulating virus and the chance of virus mutation and vaccine resistance.

**Q. Is there a possibility of iatrogenic reactions?**

A. There is an extremely small possibility of serious vaccine reactions (<1 in 500,000) against a very high chance of serious disease or death with COVID-19. The vaccines have been shown to be safe and most patients have no significant reactions or only a limited reaction like soreness at the site of injection for a couple of days.

**Q. What are the differences between Pfizer and Moderna?**

A. They are very similar. They use the same technology that use a template of the virus spike protein (messenger RNA) and not the virus itself. The Moderna vaccine has a higher dose of that mRNA template compared to the Pfizer vaccine.

**Q. What are the allowed medical exemptions?**

A. Exemptions include severe allergy or immediate allergic reaction (leading to conditions such as shortness of breath or requiring treatment such as epinephrine), rare clotting/bleeding disorders related to medications, and rare heart conditions related to medications.  Individuals must have contraindications to *both* classes of vaccine (mRNA (Pfizer or Moderna) or J&J), which is highly rare.

**Q. Where can I find all ingredients in the vaccines?**

A. Please [find comprehensive fact sheets on the Southcoast intranet](http://intranet.southcoast.org/southcoast/covid.cfm).

**Q. If I am mandated to be vaccinated against my will, in order to keep my job, and I have an adverse reaction, will Southcoast be liable?**

A. Southcoast is not vaccinating anyone against your will, as that implies that you will not provide consent. Southcoast will only give you a vaccine should you consent to be vaccinated. Our hope is, after careful consideration and getting answers to your medical concerns, you will choose to become vaccinated.

**Q. Why are we rushing into the vaccine when we don’t know the long-term side effects?**

A. Research and development of these types of vaccines began years ago, and were completed based on the need in response to COVID-19. Furthermore, technology has enabled medical science to achieve advances in vaccination much faster and more efficiently than in years past. Bringing a new vaccine to the public involves many steps including vaccine development, clinical trials, U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorization or approval, manufacturing, and distribution. Many different public organizations and private companies have worked together to make COVID-19 vaccines available to the public. While COVID-19 vaccines were developed rapidly, all steps have been taken to ensure their safety and effectiveness. Please visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/distributing/steps-ensure-safety.html> to read more.

**Q. I missed the four education sessions – will there be any more?**

A. If any additional sessions are scheduled, we will announce them via multiple channels. In the meantime, please view the following videos:

[Chief Clinical Officer Dr. Dani Hackner](https://www.southcoast.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Dr-Hackner-Vaccine-Message-to-Employees.mp4)

[Chief Nursing Officer Jackie Somerville, RN, Ph.D.](https://www.southcoast.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Jackie-Somerville-Vaccine-Message-to-Employees.mp4)

[Primary Care Physician Dr. Carlos Correia](https://vimeo.com/591227500/f2f96b4fe9)

***All information provided above is subject to change based on evolving Massachusetts, Rhode Island and federal law and regulations regarding COVID-19 vaccinations.***