

HEALTH

Alberta Health Services to mandate COVID-19 vaccines for physicians, staff, contract employees

By **Caley Gibson** • Global News

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WATCH: Alberta Health Services is making COVID-19 vaccinations mandatory for all staff, including physicians and front-line workers. Lauren Pullen reports. – Aug 31, 2021



Alberta Health Services is requiring all of its employees and contracted health-care providers to be fully vaccinated against **COVID-19**.

AHS CEO Dr. Verna Yiu made the announcement Tuesday afternoon, saying this policy includes physicians, midwives and other front-line health-care workers. All employees must be fully immunized by Oct. 31.

The new policy will apply to all AHS, Alberta Precision Labs, Carewest, CapitalCare and Covenant Health employees, members of the medical and midwifery staff, students and volunteers. Contracted continuing care providers and contracted health-care workers acting on behalf of AHS are also included.

AHS said this step is necessary to protect patients, vulnerable and immunocompromised Albertans, and anyone who works or visits any AHS site.

"This is an extraordinary but necessary measure to help protect our vital front-line health-care teams and help us maintain a safe environment for all patients and clients," Yiu said.

"Over the last year and a half, our teams have continued to provide incredible care to anyone who needs it, under extremely trying circumstances. We are grateful for their efforts and are committed to ensuring the safety of our facilities."



AHS said the latest an employee could receive their second dose to be in compliance with the new policy is Oct. 16. This allows for two weeks to pass, which is required to be considered fully immunized.

Yiu said the October cut-off date was provided to give people enough time to receive two doses of vaccine, as well as engage with stakeholders on the policy.

Yiu said employees who have a medical reason or protected ground under the Alberta Human Rights Act to not be immunized will be "reasonably accommodated."

"We believe that most of our health-care workers will want to get vaccinated," Yiu said. "We are confident that our health-care workers will step up to this and get vaccinated."

Yiu said employees who go against the policy and are not exempt will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. She said they are discussing a process, but it would include meeting with the employee, reviewing the case, discussing concerns with the employee and providing educational materials.

Employees could also face an unpaid leave of absence if they don't comply, Yiu explained.

Yiu said at this time, it's not known what the vaccination rate is among employees, but she believes it's higher than that of the general public.

AHS said the policy document will be finalized following a consultation period with unions and stakeholders.

Yiu also stressed the importance of vaccination in the general public.

"We have to deal with COVID and the best way to do it is through vaccination."

 TWEET THIS

Earlier this month, the Alberta Medical Association (AMA) called for mandatory COVID-19 vaccination of all health-care workers in the province.

At the time, a spokesperson for Health Minister Tyler Shandro told Global News the province has no plans to make vaccination mandatory.

Yiu said the policy decision was made by the AHS leadership team, supported by the AHS board.

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"This is not politically driven in any way. We did make minister Shandro aware of our policy decision but at the end of the day, this is an organizational decision because we felt it was very important to really keep Albertans safe."

Yiu said AHS had very strong legal input when developing the policy.

"We are very confident that the policy is legal," she said. "We have an underlying obligation, at the end of the day, to provide both a safe workplace for our staff, but also a safe environment for our patients and public. So yes, we have had legal review and feel that it is legal."

In a statement, Alberta Health spokesperson Steve Buick said vaccine mandates are at the discretion of employers, adding AHS did share its decision with the health minister.

"We've given priority to health-care workers in our vaccine rollout from the start, recognizing the importance of protecting them and the patients and residents they care for," Buick said.

“Some national continuing-care operators with sites in Alberta have already made COVID-19 vaccination mandatory for their staff. This decision will provide consistency within Alberta and between provinces.”



Bonnie Gostola, vice president and chair of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees' occupational health & safety committee said the union is aware of the AHS announcement.

“AUPE has been strongly encouraging members to get their COVID-19 vaccine since they became available. We are currently consulting with our labour relations professionals and legal counsel about accommodation for those members who cannot be immunized for religious or medical reasons,” Gostola said.

“In the meantime, our first and foremost priority is the health and safety of our members both at work and in their communities. We continue to strongly encourage them to get vaccinated.”

In a statement, the United Nurses of Alberta said it has not yet had time to fully review the policy, but “the union is not opposed to it as it was described in the news release and news conference.”

“UNA believes that the question of mandatory vaccination is not a labour relations or political question but is a public health policy issue that needs to be made by public health experts,” labour relations director David Harrigan said in a statement.

The UNA said it will now sit down with the employer to determine how the policy will be implemented.

COVID-19 vaccine appointments can be booked through **AHS online** or by calling 811.

Alberta's COVID-19 data Tuesday

Alberta reported 920 new cases of COVID-19 on Tuesday, from about 7,487 tests.

There are now 11,660 active cases of COVID-19 in Alberta.

Four additional deaths related to COVID-19 were reported Tuesday, bringing the province's death toll to 2,375.

There are now 431 people in hospital with COVID-19, with 106 of them being treated in intensive care.

Yiu also addressed the "significant capacity challenges" at many hospitals and health-care sites throughout the province.

She said AHS has been forced to make very difficult but necessary decisions to ensure hospital beds, ICU spaces and frontline staff are available to provide care to patients.

Some of these moves include reducing the number of non-urgent surgeries in Edmonton and Grande Prairie. AHS has also temporarily reduced bed numbers in both rural and urban health-care facilities due in large part to staffing challenges, Yiu said.

"We have taken similar steps during other waves of the pandemic. However, the impacts of this current wave are certainly being exacerbated by staffing challenges. This has been a very long pandemic. Physicians and staff have stepped up for 19 months and done incredible things but they are understandably tired," she said.

"We do have the ability to open additional ICU and acute care beds and we are doing that as quickly as we can. The biggest challenge right now is staffing those beds appropriately."

As of Aug. 30, 77.9 per cent of eligible Albertans 12 and older had received at least one dose of vaccine and 69.7 per cent were fully vaccinated.

Note: This chart is no longer being updated as of April 15, 2022.

COVID-19 VACCINATIONS	% AGED 5+ WITH AT LEAST ONE DOSE	% AGED 5+ FULLY VACCINATED	% AGED 5+ BOOSTED
Canada	0.00%	0.00%	N/A¹
Alberta	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
British Columbia	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Manitoba	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
New Brunswick	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Newfoundland and Labrador	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Nova Scotia	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Northwest Territories	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Nunavut	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Ontario	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Prince Edward Island	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Quebec	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Saskatchewan	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹
Yukon	0.00%	0.00%	N/A ¹

1. No booster dose data is available for this province or territory.

Last Updated: April 15, 2022

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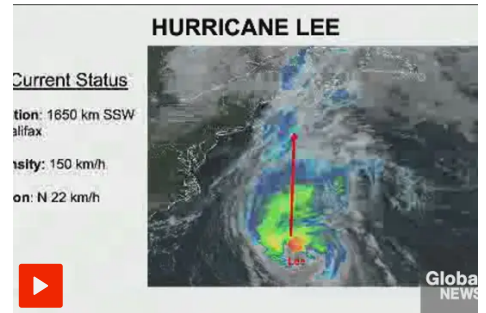
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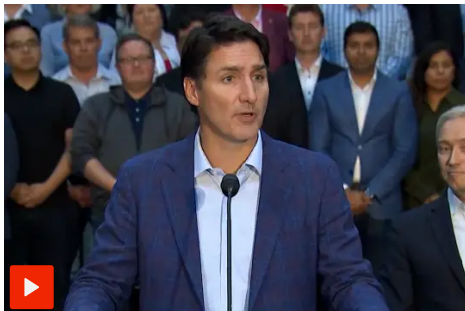
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