

The 2010-2011 Line-Up of Flu Vaccines: What Will be the Impact on Plans?

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With flu season just around the corner, and a number of new flu vaccines on the market, employers may see an increase in claims for these products. Although flu vaccines generally do not contribute significantly to a plan's overall experience, largely because a number of provinces cover basic flu vaccinations, given that last year's H1N1 flu affected patients of all ages, it will be particularly interesting to see the resulting impact on vaccination rates this year. With several new elements in play this year, it is important for plan sponsors to understand where the potential risks lie for increases in plan spending for this area, and to ensure that its plan design/contract accurately reflect intended coverage.

Canadians will be comforted to know that this year's flu vaccines contain the 2009 pandemic H1N1 strain, in addition to two seasonal influenza strains. This means that everyone can return to receiving one vaccine, rather than two separate ones required during the 2009 flu season. Currently, publicly funded programs cover flu vaccines for all residents in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Nunavut and Yukon territories, but only for those patients at highest risk of complications secondary to the flu in all other regions. However, as flu vaccinations are recommended for the vast majority of people over the age of 6 months, plans may see an increase in claims from patient populations that are not included in public flu vaccination programs.

There are a number of different flu vaccines available on the market today. However, publically funded programs will be using the standard split-virus, inactivated vaccines: Vaxigrip® and Fluviral®. The main difference between these two vaccines is that Fluviral® does not contain any antibiotics, whereas Vaxigrip® contains trace amounts of the antibiotic neomycin.

For individuals who prefer thimerosal-free (i.e. preservative-free) vaccines, then the new flu vaccines Agriflu®, Intanza®, Influvac®, and possibly FluMist®, are available. It should be noted that Intanza® and Influvac® are only indicated for use in adults. However, these preservative-free vaccines are generally not included in publically funded programs. As a result, this season, private plans may be faced with the costs of flu vaccines that publically funded programs do not cover, and potentially for patients who are otherwise covered under the public program but prefer the newer and/or preservative-free vaccines, including the new nasal spray flu vaccine.