

NYC DOHMH's Template Letter To Be Sent To Hospital Staff In Job Categories Being Targeted For The Hospital Health Care Smallpox Response Teams

Dear Hospital Employee:

On Friday, December 13, 2002, President Bush announced a voluntary smallpox vaccination program that will target up to 10,000 health care workers in New York City. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC DOHMH) has asked all acute care hospitals in the city to identify staff who would be interested in serving on the hospital's health care smallpox response teams. These teams will care for the first suspected or confirmed patients if a smallpox outbreak occurred and until other hospital workers could be vaccinated. As we want to be sure to protect those staff who volunteer to serve on these teams, we will be offering smallpox vaccine to potential volunteers as long as they, or their close contacts, do not have any of the medical conditions that put them at higher risk for complications from the smallpox vaccine.

For our hospital's health care smallpox response team, we are planning to include staff who work in those job titles that would be needed to care for the initial smallpox patients that might present to _____ [INSERT NAME OF HOSPITAL]. Since you work in a job title that is included on our team, I am inviting you to attend a general information session for staff who might be interested in volunteering for smallpox vaccination so you can learn more about this program. During this session, we will provide you with information to help you decide whether or not you should volunteer for smallpox vaccination. The date, time, and locations of these upcoming information session(s) include [**Hospitals to complete information below**]:

- 1 -
- 2 -
- 3 -

Smallpox vaccination clinics will not start at this hospital until March/April 2003 (*Hospital to select start month depending on whether your hospital is included in the initial or subsequent roll out of the program*).

[*Name of hospital*] and the NYC DOHMH are committed to making sure that this voluntary smallpox vaccination program is done as safely as possible. It is important for all employees who are thinking about volunteering for this program to understand that although rare, the smallpox vaccine can cause serious side effects, and that people with certain health problems should not volunteer for this program. We want you to err on the side of safety, and not put yourself or your loved ones at risk of a severe reaction to the vaccine.

You should not volunteer for smallpox vaccination if you, your household members or your close, intimate contacts (*for example, sexual partners*) have any of the following medical conditions:

- Weakened immune systems - including persons with HIV infection or AIDS, cancer, leukemia, lymphoma, organ transplants, severe autoimmune diseases (like lupus), or problems producing antibodies (for example, the disease agammaglobulinemia {*lack of normal antibodies*}) or persons being treated with chemotherapy, radiation therapy, high dose steroids (such as oral prednisone for more than 2 weeks) or other medicines that weaken the immune system.
- A history of EVER having the skin diseases named “eczema or atopic dermatitis” (*Persons who have ever had a skin problem that caused them to have red, patchy, scaly, itchy skin for more than 2 weeks that was not due to another cause, and especially if this skin problem tended to come and go, may have the diseases of eczema/atopic dermatitis*). Please talk to your doctor if you are not sure if you have ever had eczema or atopic dermatitis; if there is any question about whether or not you have these diseases, we will recommend that you not get the vaccine at this time.
- Darier’s disease – an inherited skin disease that usually starts in childhood in which a person develops extremely itchy bumps on the skin.
- Any currently active skin diseases that causes breaks in the skin, such as burns, psoriasis, shingles, an allergic rash, impetigo, or severe acne (If these skin diseases are not active and have fully healed, it is okay to get the vaccine).
- Women who are pregnant or who will be trying to get pregnant in the four weeks after vaccination.

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not currently list this as a reason to exclude a potential vaccinee, the NYC DOHMH recommends that persons who live with or have close, physical contact with a child less than one year of age should consider not getting vaccinated at this time, since (a) young infants may be at higher risk for severe reactions (*especially encephalitis*) if they are exposed to the *vaccinia* virus, the virus that is in the smallpox vaccine and (b) it is difficult to avoid close contact with the skin when caring for an infant.

In addition to the health conditions listed above, persons who themselves have any of the following health problems or conditions should NOT get the smallpox vaccine:

- Women who are breastfeeding,
- Anyone who is ill at the time of the vaccination clinic,
- Anyone with inflammation of the eye or using steroid eye drops,
- Anyone with allergies to one of the ingredients in the vaccine (*polymyxin B, streptomycin, chlortetracycline, or neomycin*) or has a history of an allergic reaction to the smallpox vaccine,

- Anyone with a severe allergy to latex (*severe allergy reactions include hives, difficulty breathing, wheezing, weakness, laryngeal edema, a fast heart beat, dizziness or low blood pressure within 30 minutes of being exposed to latex*), or
- Anyone under 18 years of age or more than 64 years of age.

If you are unable or uninterested in volunteering for smallpox vaccination, you do not need to explain why you are not volunteering, and your job will not be affected. On the other hand, if you decide to be vaccinated, you will be expected to be available to take care of any suspected or confirmed smallpox patients who are admitted to our hospital, should a smallpox outbreak occur in New York City.

[OPTIONAL – Hospitals may want to send additional information with this letter, including the general CDC fact sheets or the NYC DOHMH Question and Answer Sheet]

We have included a copy of an information sheet for health care workers that was provided by the NYC DOHMH (or CDC) to help answer any additional concerns or questions that you may have about this smallpox vaccine program.

We recognize that the decision about whether or not to volunteer for our hospital's healthcare smallpox response team is a difficult one. We urge you to attend these informational sessions and to read the educational materials provided so that you can make an informed decision. You should understand all the information concerning the risks of the vaccine and weigh this against the benefits of serving on our health care smallpox response team to help care for our patients and to protect New York City against a potential attack.

Although we hope that we will never face a smallpox outbreak in New York City, the events of the Fall 2001 have taught us that it is essential to be as prepared as possible, especially against the threats of terrorism.

Thank you for considering participation in this voluntary smallpox vaccination program.

Sincerely,