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Spectrum Health workers can use natural immunity as vaccine mandate exemption

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Spectrum Health will grant temporary exemptions from its employee vaccine mandate to individuals who can prove they have naturally acquired immunity to COVID-19.

The west Michigan hospital system, which is in the process of merging with Southfield-based Beaumont Health, will grant an exemption to those who have a positive PCR or antigen test for COVID-19 plus a positive antibody test from within the past three months, the health system said in a statement Thursday.

The exemption, the first for a major health system in Michigan, was developed "as new research has emerged" on natural immunity.

"While we still recommend vaccination for people with prior COVID-19 infection, according to this new research, there is increasing evidence that natural infection affords protection from COVID-19 reinfection and severe symptoms for a period of time," the statement said. "Current studies are not clear on how long natural immunity protects from reinfection."

The policy could be updated if future evidence shows naturally acquired protection is waning or longer lasting, or if there is a validated antibody test result showing immunity, the statement said.

Spectrum announced in late July that it would require the COVID-19 vaccine within eight weeks of the Food and Drug Administration approving a vaccine, but noted it would consider some exemptions.

Those exemptions include religious exemptions and medical exemptions determined by a medical exemption committee. The hospital system's medical exemption committee recommended the health system allow for a temporary exemption for naturally acquired immunity based on available research, the statement said.

Detroit-based Henry Ford Health System, Beaumont Health and Trinity Health Michigan have required their employees to get the vaccine with no exemptions for naturally acquired immunity.

Spectrum and Beaumont signed a formal integration agreement last week moving the process forward. The two health systems hope to launch a new system this fall.

It's not clear what influence, if any, Spectrum's policy will have on Beaumont workers who are not granted the same natural immunity exemption.

"We can't speculate on what will happen in the future," said Bob Ortlieb, a spokesman for Beaumont.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said current evidence suggests it is uncommon for people who have COVID-19 to become reinfected within 90 days.

"Experts don't know for sure how long this protection lasts, and the risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19 far outweighs any benefits of natural immunity," the CDC said.

The CDC in August said previously infected individuals in a Kentucky study who declined vaccination were more than twice as likely to be reinfected than the fully vaccinated.

A separate Cleveland Clinic study found employees who had tested positive for the virus and declined vaccination were not reinfected during a five-month period.

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