

Remaining Vigilant this Flu Season amid COVID-19 Pandemic

OSF HealthCare officials urge community members to get flu vaccine

While the exact timing and duration of flu seasons can vary, influenza activity typically begins in October, lasts through May, and usually peaks between December and February. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) flu activity was unusually low throughout the 2020-2021 flu season both in the United States and globally, despite high levels of testing. The lower numbers are credited in large part to COVID-19 mitigation measures such as wearing face masks, staying home, hand washing, school closures, reduced travel, increased ventilation of indoor spaces, and physical distancing.

This year, with the development of three safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines (a Pfizer vaccine people 12 years of age and older as well as Johnson & Johnson and Moderna for people age 18 and over), a decrease in cases and a lift on some mask restrictions soon followed. This change has led to not only a rise in COVID-19 cases, including [breakthrough cases](#), but also an increase in common seasonal illnesses that were not seen last year.

Now, the CDC has made a strong recommendation for everyone who is able (six months or older) to receive the flu vaccine this year in order to help keep flu cases at bay, especially due to the high prevalence of COVID-19.

Bill Walsh, M.D., Chief Medical Officer, OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center

“This fall, with both flu and COVID to concern ourselves with, I think it makes it even more important to do your part and get the flu vaccine. As soon as your healthcare provider starts to offer flu shots is a good time to get it. It will protect you for the entire flu season.” (:16)

If you have not yet gotten your COVID-19 vaccine and would like to get both, the CDC notes that both flu and COVID-19 vaccines can safely be given at the same time.

In addition to getting a flu shot, Dr. Walsh urges others to continue to practice the COVID-19 safety precautions this fall and winter to not only protect from COVID-19, but also from other illnesses such as the flu.

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“Masking does work. It works to help prevent the spread of germs. It will help protect you from getting a cold, the flu, and COVID if you mask and others mask. Keep that in mind as you go through this coming fall and winter. Masking, keeping your distance, and washing your hands are the best ways to stay safe – outside of the now fully FDA approved (Pfizer) COVID vaccine as well as the flu vaccine.” (:32)

Furthermore, if you are feeling ill it is important to rest and recover at home in order to avoid spreading any illnesses.

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“It used to be that if you or your children were sick, you’d give them a little Tylenol and send them off to school or take Tylenol yourself and go to work because you weren’t worried so much about getting other people sick. This year more than ever, when you’re sick please stay home from work and keep your kids home from school.” (:20)

Similar to COVID-19, those who are at highest risk for getting seriously ill from the flu are the elderly, the very young, and those with underlying risk factors such as diabetes or hypertension, COPD, heart failure or heart disease, or the immunocompromised. However, this does not mean that healthy, young individuals cannot get seriously ill – which is why vaccination is so important.

Dr. Walsh says to head to the nearest emergency department if you get seriously ill from the flu – especially if you are experiencing chest pains.

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“If you have any symptoms that are concerning to you, please seek care, get tested, figure out what is going on – especially if you are having difficulty breathing. If you feel short of breath, it is important to know if you have the flu, COVID, or something else. Is it a bacterial pneumonia? There are many reasons to be short of breath.” (:22)

To learn more about getting a flu shot this year, talk to your primary care provider or find an urgent care center near you. If you have not yet received your COVID-19 vaccine, [sign up today](#).