

COVID-19 and Seasonal Illnesses

In 2020, the restrictions and safety measures in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a tremendous decrease in seasonal illnesses, such as colds, the flu, and other upper respiratory infections. This year, with the easing of some of these restrictions and many Americans yet to receive their COVID-19 booster shot – or remaining unvaccinated altogether – health experts warn that these seasonal illnesses could be back in full swing.

With the potential for seasonal illnesses to be severe again, in addition to COVID-19 cases on the rise, including the new omicron variant, experts advise to not let your guard down and to remain vigilant. The best ways to avoid getting or spreading any illness still include wearing your mask indoors in public spaces, washing your hands frequently, covering your cough if you have one – and getting both your flu and COVID-19 vaccines. Keeping up with booster shots is key, too.

“Part of the reason we want to have you keep up with your COVID vaccines – whether you’ve had the disease or you’ve had the first two shots – is because now if you get the disease it may be really mild. And we all have to do our part to keep ourselves from getting sick even if it is not severe illness,” says Carolyn Gale, PA, an OSF HealthCare family medicine provider.

Gale warns that because the vaccine does help prevent serious illness, if you do end up contracting COVID-19 you may have very minor symptoms that could mimic other seasonal illnesses. This is why it is important to not assume you have a cold until you know for sure. Because many individuals are immunocompromised for various reasons, someone else could get very sick if it spreads to them even if your symptoms are mild. So the most important step is ruling out COVID-19 before anything else.

“Even if you had it last year, I would recommend to go ahead and get COVID testing if nothing else. Especially if it’s mild. If it’s a mild cold or something like that, just go get a COVID test,” Gale advises.

If your test comes back positive, you should follow COVID-19 protocols by self-isolating at home. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends staying at home (except to get medical care), separating yourself from others, cleaning high-touch surfaces every day, monitoring your symptoms, and seeking immediate medical attention by going to the emergency room or calling 911 if symptoms worsen.

If COVID-19 is ruled out, there is a chance you may have the flu. According to the CDC, flu activity typically starts to increase in October, most commonly peaks in February, and can last into May. The 2020-2021 flu season in particular was essentially non-existent because of the precautions in place due to the pandemic. However, this flu season may be different. So how do you know if it’s the flu?

“If you have influenza, you almost always have a fever – but not 100% of the time. With that, there is a dry cough, body aches, you feel like you got hit by a Mack truck – and you get really suspicious that it is influenza,” explains Gale.

The CDC says Influenza A (H3N2) viruses have already been reported by public health laboratories this season, and flu seasons that are predominantly Influenza A are often associated with more severe flu seasons, especially for older adults and young children. While early reports indicate that this flu season has the potential to become severe, the good news is that many individuals can rest and recover at home – especially if they do not have other comorbidities and have received their annual flu vaccine. However, certain individuals do need to take extra precautions.

“If you have influenza and you don’t have a lot of high risk symptoms, and you don’t have a fever, usually you can wait seven days and ride it out and not end up in the hospital. But if you have underlying health risks, get tested – because if you have influenza you need to be treated within the first three days of the disease,” Gale says.

If both COVID-19 and the flu are ruled out, you likely have a cold or a different respiratory illness that still requires rest and recovery at home – along with close monitoring for any new or worsening symptoms.

“Talking with your provider when you are unsure of your symptoms and what it could be is the best way to go about it,” advises Gale.

Most importantly, if you have any sort of illness this season, take it seriously, get tested, stay at home, and avoid public spaces until you recover so you avoid spreading it to others.

If you are not feeling well this winter season, especially as the holidays approach, schedule a rapid COVID-19 test and seek medical care from your provider or an urgent care location. Additionally, to find an OSF OnCall Urgent Care or a Prompt Care near you, go to www.osfhealthcare.org.