

Signs are pointing to a tough flu season for the U.S. this year.

While influenza has not quite reached epidemic levels yet, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) it's spreading faster than it did at the same time last year.

The most recent Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) Influenza Surveillance Update states that there have been 136 positive cases of influenza reported to the IDPH across the state, and there has been one pediatric death linked to the virus.

"This is not something to play around with," warned Elaine Rynders, PA-C, an OSF HealthCare Physician Assistant at Saint Anthony's Health Center in Alton, Illinois. "It's something that can cause major problems, and if you have other [health] problems, you need to try and protect yourself."

The Early reports for this season's vaccine have also not been positive. During Australia's flu season, it proved about 10% effective against this season's dominate virus. Despite this, the vaccine has the ability to lessen the severity of the flu, and health experts still recommend that everyone over the age of six months receives the shot.

"That should not deter anyone from getting it, because young children, older adults, adults who have comorbidities or other illnesses like heart disease, COPD, those kinds of things, they need to be protected because the flu is going to wipe them out," said Rynders.

People can also protect themselves and others from the flu virus by practicing good hand hygiene and properly covering sneezes and coughs.

"To really help protect yourself against the flu, personal hygiene. Wash your hands," said Rynders. "In the grocery stores now they've got things where you can clean the hand rail on the grocery cart, things like that will help."

If you are suffering from flu-like symptoms, the CDC recommends that you stay home and keep away from others for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone, except to get medical care or for other necessities.

Staying at home means avoiding normal activities, including work, school, athletic events/practice, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings to keep from making others sick.