

Full guide to the 2026-2027 flu, COVID-19 and RSV season

(Original article)

Respiratory illness season is here, and medical experts are encouraging people to [take steps now](#) to protect themselves and their loved ones.

As temperatures drop and families begin spending more time indoors, respiratory viruses become an increasing concern. This fall, flu (influenza) activity is already appearing earlier in parts of the country, raising questions about what the months ahead could look like.

[Jon C. Michel, MD](#), is a pulmonary critical care physician and vice president of the Medical Specialties Service Line with OSF HealthCare.

"I think the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) is predicting that the 2027 respiratory virus season should be similar to the 2026 season," Dr. Michel says. "We are seeing a slightly earlier shift in the flu uptake, especially on the West Coast, and it's spreading here to the Midwest."

The CDC's [FluView](#) report for the week ending October 10 notes that while flu activity remains low nationally, the highest activity is occurring in the western United States ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regions 9 and 10](#)).

But an earlier arrival doesn't necessarily mean a more severe respiratory illness season. Dr. Michel says it's important to prepare now rather than wait for respiratory illnesses to become more widespread.

Three respiratory viruses to watch

While numerous respiratory viruses circulate throughout the year, three remain a primary focus for medical professionals.

"The three that we focus on the most are the flu, COVID-19 and RSV. We do that because we have vaccinations for those viruses, we have therapies for those viruses and they tend to be the ones that make you quite sick," Dr. Michel says. "There's a wide variety of other cold viruses that we could diagnose now, but it's mostly academic and interesting. There's a rhinovirus, or the common cold, there's the parainfluenza virus. We don't have treatments for those, but it's important to understand what the patient has so we can tell prognosis and tell the duration of illness."

Dr. Michel says advancements in medical testing have made it easier to identify which virus is causing an illness. A decade ago, testing often focused primarily on influenza. In 2020, the global pandemic turned attention to COVID-19 testing. Today, respiratory testing panels allow medical teams to check for multiple viruses, including RSV, helping providers make more informed decisions about care.

[RSV prevention](#) has also come a long way. Newer preventive options, including vaccines for eligible pregnant women and older adults, as well as [protective antibody injections](#) for infants and certain young children, offer additional protection against severe illness.

Don't delay your flu vaccine

With flu activity appearing earlier this fall, Dr. Michel encourages people not to put off [getting vaccinated](#). Getting your flu shot before activity increases in your community can help reduce the risk of severe illness and hospitalization, especially for young children, older adults, pregnant women and people with underlying medical conditions.

People should also speak with their health care provider about which flu, COVID-19 and RSV immunizations are recommended for them based on their age, health history and other eligibility factors.

Simple steps to prevent illness

Vaccines are an important tool, but [everyday habits](#) also play a major role in preventing the spread of respiratory illnesses.

"There's some commonsense stuff that we don't always lean into. Make sure that you avoid ill people. If you're going to be out in public and you're immunocompromised or prone to getting ill, wear a tight-fitting mask," Dr. Michel says. "Make sure if you're sick, you don't go out and expose other people, either."

Other steps include washing your hands regularly, covering coughs and sneezes and cleaning frequently touched surfaces. These simple habits can help protect those most vulnerable to serious respiratory complications.

What to do if you get sick

Not every respiratory illness requires an emergency department visit or hospitalization. The OSF HealthCare Ministry has virtual options, including [OSF OnCall Virtual Urgent Care](#), as well as walk-in clinics known as [OSF OnCall Urgent Care](#) or [OSF PromptCare](#).

In 2020, OSF OnCall launched a free, at-home monitoring service for babies and toddlers up to five years old. The digital service continues today and includes an at-home care kit and easy access to a real-time chat. If necessary, a video visit is an option for parents or guardians of an infant or young child with any respiratory illness, including RSV.

For many mild viral infections, supportive care is the main approach to treatment. That means focusing on relieving symptoms and helping your body recover while the illness runs its course.

"Rest, [drink] fluids, avoiding further infections and good nutrition," Dr. Michel says. "Sometimes breathing treatments [are needed]. But there aren't any medications, FDA-approved or otherwise, that have been shown to shorten the length [of illness] or stop that from getting worse in some of those other viruses."

If symptoms worsen or you're at greater risk of complications, contacting your [primary care provider](#) early is important. Some treatments for flu and COVID-19 work best when started soon after symptoms begin.

Can vitamins help prevent respiratory illnesses?

It's common to reach for vitamin C, zinc or other supplements when respiratory illness season arrives. But Dr. Michel cautions against treating supplements as a cure-all.

He says vitamins like these have been studied extensively, but they're not a "magic bullet" against respiratory viruses.

For people with nutritional deficiencies, addressing those deficiencies through a balanced diet or recommended supplementation can support normal immune function.

However, taking additional vitamins does not guarantee you won't become sick, and supplements should not replace vaccinations, healthy habits or medical treatment when needed.

When should you seek medical care?

Contact a health care provider if you experience:

- Symptoms that continue to worsen rather than improve
- A persistent or worsening fever
- Difficulty staying hydrated or keeping fluids down
- Symptoms that improve and then return or become more severe
- Respiratory symptoms that are especially concerning because of an underlying medical condition

Severe difficulty breathing, chest pain, new confusion or other signs of a medical emergency require immediate emergency care.

For those who become seriously ill, OSF HealthCare hospitals have intensive care units (ICUs) and specialized teams equipped to care for people experiencing severe respiratory complications.

"OSF is leading the charge because we have a broad-based primary care network, including urgent cares and virtual urgent cares, along with your primary care doctor," Dr. Michel says. "We shouldn't be ashamed of calling those places right away if we feel like we're ill, because there are therapies that are effective for this."

Act before respiratory illness strikes

Respiratory illness season is here, but there are steps you can take to protect yourself and your family. Stay current on recommended vaccinations, recognize when symptoms require medical attention and don't hesitate to contact your OSF HealthCare team when you need help.