

PRINT-Flu Remains Bigger Threat than COVID-19 (Updated)

Editor's note: CDC reports flu-related deaths in the U.S. has reached 16,000 with five pediatric deaths in Illinois and two in Michigan. This story was updated 2/26/2020 to reflect updated number of pediatric deaths nationally, including in Illinois and Michigan.

Despite heightened alerts about the novel corona virus, COVID-19, local health leaders stress the seasonal flu remains far more concerning. The two Illinoisans diagnosed with COVID-19 have recovered and returned to work. Meanwhile, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says flu activity remains high in the US and expected to continue for weeks. The agency emphasizes pediatric deaths, at 105, are the second highest since they were included in weekly reporting in 2004.

In Illinois and throughout the country, health facilities are mostly treating the unusual Influenza B-Victoria strain of flu virus. The last time this occurred was the 1992-1993 season. Terri McCrery, infection preventionist for OSF HealthCare says the numbers affected by the new coronavirus can't compare to the seasonal flu.

"You're talking a handful nationally here with the coronavirus and you're talking millions with the flu so we need to be watchful of the flu," she warned.

McCrery says this latest flu strain is affecting children most significantly. The overall cumulative hospitalization rate — 47.4 per 100,000 population — is similar to that seen in recent influenza seasons; however, "rates in children and young adults are higher than at this time in recent seasons," the CDC reports.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says there have been increased hospitalizations but fewer deaths from the flu so far this season. Illinois is among the states where the risk remains widespread and high.

Even if you don't often get sick, McCrery says it only takes one exposure to influenza which is a long-lasting airborne virus. She says the flu can have a devastating impact, even on those considered young and with a healthy immune system.

A 16 year-old junior at Glenwood High School in the Ball-Chatham, Illinois school district [died from complications of the flu](#). Joey Sandhaas came down with pneumonia and fought for his life for more than a week.

"It's not too late to get the flu shot. Don't think you're going to be one of the ones that it skips by and not get the flu because you could get it and it could be deadly," she advised.

OSF HealthCare has imposed visitor restrictions at its hospitals because of the elevated risk. The restrictions encourage people to voluntarily limit hospital visits, especially if feeling ill. Visitors 18 and over must wash or sanitize their hands and wear masks available at hospital and medical office entrances.

McCrery also encourages those who have flu-like symptoms to be seen early, especially if they have underlying health issues.

She urges everyone, "Don't go out in public if you have the signs and symptoms – the fever, the cough, and runny nose. Stay home but then if you're home for a day or two, go be seen. Don't let it wait. The flu can turn into pneumonia, bronchitis and that would be require to be seen by the doctor so please be cautious."

Anti-viral drugs can be used to treat flu illness. The CDC recommends prompt treatment for people who have flu infection or suspected flu infection and who are at high risk of serious flu complications, such as people with asthma, diabetes (including gestational diabetes), or heart disease.

If you suspect you have the flu, please call ahead to your health care provider including [OSF Urgo](#) or [OSF PromptCare](#) so staff can take proper precautions to assess you. [OSF OnCall](#) is also an online option where you can be connected virtually to be assessed.

[Here are tips to know when to seek emergency care for flu-like symptoms.](#)

[Here are some frequently asked questions](#) about flu vaccines.

More information for web.

Complete list of hospital visitor restrictions due to high flu risk

- Visitors should be at least 18 years of age and older. This will minimize patient exposure to children, who are known to be high risk for transmission of viral infections, and will also help protect children from contracting an illness while visiting the hospital.
- Individuals who are not feeling well or have had flu-like symptoms in the past seven days should not visit hospitalized patients. Flu-like symptoms include a fever of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, cough, and/or sore throat.
- When entering and leaving a patient's room, everyone should wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand foam/gel. Washing helps limit the spread of disease.
- People should cough or sneeze into their arm, shoulder, or tissue (not hands) to reduce the spread of germs that can be passed from hands touching surfaces or people.

While the voluntary request is restrictive in nature, the health care community firmly believes the request is in the best interest of patient health and safety.