Flu Season During COVID
Planning for one while dealing with the other
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As we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, it's almost time for flu season, which typically runs from October through March. Every year in the United States, upwards of 10-percent of the population gets influenza. That's roughly 30 million people – and that doesn't include the number of people who don't have symptoms. Of those who get sick, half a million will end up hospitalized and between 30 and 50,000 will die from the flu.

Compounding things for the upcoming flu season is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Flu and COVID are both viral respiratory illnesses, symptoms can be similar, but distinct, and it is possible to have both at the same time. Because the symptoms overlap so much, it will be important to have appropriate testing.

While the strains of seasonal flu may vary each year, those who are most affected stays consistent.

"The ones who are at highest risk for influenza getting serious are the elderly - over 65 - and the very young. Middle-aged healthy people get influenza but they don't get that sick with it. If they have a risk factor - a chronic illness like diabetes or hypertension, COPD, heart failure or heart disease, they have some immunocompromised illness - then they can get pretty sick with influenza. So if you think about 30 million people, systems can get overwhelmed if too many people get too sick," says Mark Meeker, MD, OSF HealthCare vice president of community medicine and an internal medicine physician by training.

While work continues on a vaccine for COVID-19, the annual flu vaccine will be readily available. The latest numbers show only 45-percent of adults get the flu vaccine, even though vaccines reduce the risk of flu-related hospitalizations among adults by 40-percent. Additionally, Dr. Meeker says while it may not prevent 100-percent of influenza because of the variety of the strains, data shows that people who get the flu shot don't get as sick.

According to Dr. Meeker, there will be a couple of keys to navigating the upcoming flu season: The more people who get vaccinated, the less spread there is of influenza, and the best way to prevent yourself from getting sick is not being exposed to those who are. Both will be important to help keep the health care system from becoming overwhelmed with patients.

"The virus travels through channels to spread from person to person. Every time someone gets vaccinated they shut down one channel, so the more people that get vaccinated, there are fewer channels that virus has to spread."

"People with chronic Illnesses, the elderly and the very young for influenza, they need to prevent exposure and the way they do that is to avoid people who are sick. The most common transmission of both these viruses is person to person via droplets, it's not touching something and touching yourself, the most common transmission is person to person. If you avoid people that are sick and if you avoid going out and being around people when you're sick, both of those things mitigate the spread of the infection."

Because of some of the efforts to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus – including encouraging good handwashing habits, maintaining physical distance from others, wearing a mask when in public - Dr. Meeker is hopeful that will have a positive impact on the spread of influenza as well. Regardless, he says, OSF HealthCare is prepared to handle the upcoming flu season.

"If you prepare for these things and you're ready, it's a lot easier to handle it. We're learning more and more every day about COVID-19, we've already learned a lot about influenza. What we can't predict is how virulent the influenza virus is going to be this year, how infective it's going to be. Flu seasons vary, some are worse than others and we can't really predict that. That's the one thing that worries me a little bit - is it going to be a really bad flu season, or are we going to be fortunate and have a good season. But the one thing is, we're prepared."

Learn more about influenza and how to treat it here.