

Respiratory illnesses overwhelming hospitals, health care providers

Respiratory illnesses like influenza, COVID-19 and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) are leading to many people being seriously ill, overwhelming hospitals and health care providers across Illinois.

Flu remains the dominant virus

"We're seeing a lot of patients be positive with the flu. It makes you feel really bad with headache, body aches, chills, cough and fevers to name a few," says Sarah Overton, chief nursing officer of OSF Medical Group, Home Care and Employee Health. "But we're also seeing some COVID-19 and RSV. RSV attacks very young children and older adults."

All the viruses spiking at the same time have been "somewhat crippling" for healthcare providers, Overton says OSF HealthCare hospitals are seeing high inpatients counts, with many people coming in sick with respiratory illnesses through the emergency department.

Across Illinois, nearly 20% of emergency department visits were for acute respiratory illness, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH). 7.8% of those visits are attributed to patients with the flu.

"From Chicago and Rockford down to Alton, we're seeing a large number of respiratory illnesses. And I think the country is seeing it overall," Overton says. "The SIREN notifications from the IDPH show that other health systems in Illinois, not just OSF, are seeing this."

Illinois' respiratory activity level, calculated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) moved up to High in late December, dipped to Moderate in January, and has now returned to High to start February.

"These viruses can kill"

The IDPH has reported five flu deaths this respiratory illness season. Along with three people dying from RSV, and one person dying from RSV and COVID-19.

"There's a little bit of complacency or feeling like the COVID-19 pandemic is done. But these viruses can kill, and they can lead to major medical complications and hospital admissions. I've talked to some of my colleagues who are the nursing leaders in the hospitals, and patients coming in are indeed sick. If you can manage at home, we recommend you do so," Overton says.

For those who are immunocompromised or chronically ill, Overton says you should consult with a medical professional in person if you are sick, but if you're a fairly healthy individual who is mildly ill, consider staying home and rest. [OSF Medical Group and OSF OnCall](#) offer virtual [Urgent Care](#) services for many outpatient appointments, including visits with primary care providers and specialists.

For those caring for themselves at home, there are several over-the-counter medications to help alleviate symptoms. Additionally, a health care provider may prescribe antiviral medication.

"Antiviral medication is most effective is initiated less than 48 hours after your symptoms begin," says IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra.

Flu vaccine rates down

"We've got ample flu vaccine. We are behind our influenza vaccine rates of where we've been in years past," Overton says. "It's not too late to get your flu shot, it's not too late to get your pneumonia shot. If you get it at a retail pharmacy, that's great. You can also get it at OSF or another healthcare provider. We just want you to get vaccinated."

Flu vaccines are offered at OSF primary care and many medical specialty offices, along with commercial pharmacies. The [CDC's Flu Vaccine Finder](#) allows you to type in your zip code and find options closest to you. Overton also recommends speaking with your healthcare provider about the recently-approved [RSV vaccine](#) available for some.

Respiratory illnesses impacting care teams

"Unfortunately, we have had some experiences with respiratory illnesses in our staff," Overton says. "We need to do everything we can to protect them. OSF Mission Partners (employees) have started masking in those areas we know exposure is likely." Respiratory cough stations with hand sanitizer, tissues and masks are available at all OSF facilities.

How health systems being overloaded impacts patients

"When we overwhelm the health system, it could lead to delays in other critical illnesses that need to come to the emergency room or urgent care to receive adequate management," Overton says.

To protect yourself and others, Overton recommends regularly washing and sanitizing your hands. Also make sure to cover your cough to decrease the spread of respiratory droplets, which is a major way the flu and other respiratory illnesses spread.

When to head to the emergency department

"Those hallmark signs of when to see care is when a fever isn't responding to medications after 24-48 hours. Or when you're extremely uncomfortable and experiencing respiratory impacts like shortness of breath that you are struggling to breathe," Overton says.

Warning signs look different for kids and adults. The CDC breaks down symptoms to keep a close eye on:

In children

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish lips or face
- Ribs pulling in with each breath
- Chest pain
- Severe muscle pain (child refuses to walk)
- Dehydration (no urine for 8 hours, dry mouth, no tears when crying)
- Not alert or interacting when awake
- Seizures
- Fever above 104 degrees Fahrenheit that is not controlled by fever-reducing medicine
- In children younger than 12 weeks, any fever
- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical conditions

In adults

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath

- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Persistent dizziness, confusion, inability to arouse
- Seizures
- Not urinating
- Severe muscle pain
- Severe weakness or unsteadiness
- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen