

COVID up, RSV down, Flu steady

The last few months, communities across America have been hit hard by a number of respiratory illnesses.

The viruses have come and gone in waves. In the late fall, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) was spreading quickly through younger children and older adults. Fast forward to the present day, COVID-19 is once again the main antagonist, while influenza remains in the community as well.

“RSV cases have steadily down trended over the last month ago. Concurrently, we’ve seen an increase in influenza activity. Influenza activity is also seasonal, and was expected to happen during this period,” says Douglas Kasper, MD, infectious disease specialist with OSF HealthCare. “Influenza cases have also taken a downturn over the last two weeks. Typically, we will see a second spike of flu cases in March and April, so it’s not too late to get your flu shot.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) COVID-19 Tracker indicated that Illinois was at a medium level for COVID-19 hospitalizations through the week ending January 13th.

Dr. Kasper is also the section head of infectious disease at the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria. He says COVID-19 cases are making the rounds throughout OSF hospitals across the communities OSF serves, in large part due to holiday gatherings, travel and kids going back to school.

“When we talked about COVID-19 in the beginning, we were worried about very severe infections,” Dr. Kasper says. “Fortunately, that has diminished significantly. We still do see people in the hospital, particularly those who are the most vulnerable, that can have difficult times clearing COVID infection. But for the majority of the population who are getting infected, most people are on their second, third, or even more number of times being infected. The severity of symptoms seems to be less than prior infection, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t disrupt their life.”

Dr. Kasper says the best way to protect yourself against severe infection is still the COVID-19 vaccine.

“Vaccination remains the best tool. We know you can still become infected after becoming vaccinated, but the benefit of the vaccine is lessening the severity of symptoms and returning to whatever activity you have planned,” he says.

The current COVID-19 vaccine is not a booster, as some may think. It’s a reformulated vaccine that’s considered to be separate, as far as the COVID-19 strains it covers, according to Dr. Kasper.

“If you’ve received a few COVID-19 shots in 2021 or 2022, you got a booster and you felt like this was a reiteration of that, it’s a little different. That’s the benefit of at least one more COVID vaccine,” Dr. Kasper says. “It adds to the library of immunity in our population. Something that’s different than just boosting over and over again.”

Another tool available to stop the spread of COVID-19 is testing. Free tests are available at [COVID.gov](https://www.covid.gov). At least four tests can be shipped to your home, free of charge. Dr. Kasper says this is a great way for people with mild symptoms to have peace of mind, and not spread the virus to others if they are positive.

“Testing for COVID-19 is unique. It can be done rapidly; it can be done at home. It does lend some information, as well, if you’re going to be hosting people or traveling where you may want to make others aware if you tested positive,” Dr. Kasper says. “If you’re feeling ill, and you take a test, try to rest and stay at home from work until you’re feeling better. Then, whatever period of infectiousness you’ve had will have passed by that point.”

For more severe cases of COVID-19, Dr. Kasper says Paxlovid has become a widespread option for patients.

“Paxlovid is a combination of two antiviral medications,” Dr. Kasper says. “They work to kill the virus. They terminate the virus from replicating, that’s all they do. They don’t modify your immune system or do anything to your blood cells or modify any other part of your body. When you have a viral infection and you want to take an antiviral medication, you want to stop the virus from creating new copies of itself. Also, you want to do that as early as possible.”

Dr. Kasper says Paxlovid, and other antiviral medications, are available for positive COVID-19 patients through OSF PromptCare, OSF OnCall Urgent Care, and primary care locations so you don’t have to visit the emergency room. He adds that Tamiflu is often used when people are having a more severe flu case.

OSF HealthCare offers telehealth options that are available by phone or computer. You can talk quickly to an OSF OnCall medical provider at osfoncall.org/virtualvisit. They can walk you through your symptoms and provide a treatment plan and medication if needed.