



NEWS RELEASE

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IDPH Offers Recommendations for Avoiding Respiratory Viruses as Seasonal Illnesses Increase

Winter Surge in Hospital Admissions is Driven by Flu; IDPH Reminds Public it's NOT too Late to get Flu, COVID-19 and RSV Shots

CHICAGO – The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) announced that in line with the national trend, the state's overall respiratory illness level has ticked up from Moderate to High, driven by an expected early winter jump in hospital admissions.

IDPH's [Seasonal Respiratory Illness Dashboard](#) indicates that emergency department (ED) visits for Acute Respiratory Illness topped 21% in the week ending December 28, up from 17% the previous week. During the same period, the number of ED visits for flu more than doubled to 6.2% from 3% while ED visits for COVID-19 were at 2%, up from 1.5%.

With respiratory illnesses on the upswing last month, IDPH issued a health alert to hospitals and healthcare facilities recommending that they take note of local conditions and consider targeted steps to mitigate the circulation of seasonal illnesses. These could include visitor restrictions and source control through measures like masking.

“The New Year has arrived, and Illinois is experiencing the expected winter surge in seasonal respiratory illnesses,” said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra. “It is now more important than ever to use the many tools at our disposal to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. The most effective tool remains vaccinations for flu, COVID-19, and RSV. It is not too late to get your vaccines, as the seasonal respiratory season can extend late into the spring.

“Other effective tools to prevent exposure to respiratory illnesses include enhanced ventilation, good hand hygiene, and a well-fitting mask,” Dr. Vohra continued. “These tools may be valuable to all our Illinois residents but are especially important for those most at risk including individuals over 65, individuals with chronic medical conditions, and individuals who are immunocompromised.”

Director Vohra recommended that anyone who is feeling symptoms of respiratory illness – such as a fever, runny nose, sore throat or cough – consider getting tested and treated early in the

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course of their illness, especially if they are at risk for serious illness or spreading it to someone who is at risk of serious illness. Treatments for Flu and COVID-19 are most effective when they are given early in the course of the illness. Those who are ill should avoid spreading germs to others by self-isolating (i.e. staying away from others when they are ill) or wearing a mask if unable to isolate.

For those who are unvaccinated, public health officials note that it's not too late to get vaccinated. It takes about two weeks for vaccinations to provide their full level of protection. Getting shots now will offer protection through the cold and flu season that lasts into the spring.

Sadly, the IDPH Respiratory Illness Dashboard has recorded four pediatric deaths this season from flu, COVID-19 and RSV, providing a stark reminder about the importance of vaccinations for children and of the risk of serious illness from these largely preventable seasonal illnesses.

IDPH has posted two helpful new FAQ documents on its website providing the [latest guidance on vaccinations](#) and how to [get tested and treated](#) for seasonal illnesses. In addition, the CDC has created a new [Respiratory Illness Data Channel](#) that provides nationwide county specific information that would be valuable for anyone planning to travel out of state.

The FDA and CDC have approved new vaccines for [COVID-19](#) and [flu](#) as well as updated who can receive the [RSV vaccines](#). The new COVID-19 vaccines and the new flu shots are recommended for everyone over the age of 6 months. The RSV vaccine is recommended for everyone 75 years and older and those between [60-74 years who are at risk for serious illness](#). But if you got an RSV shot last winter, you do not need another at this time, according to the CDC. Those in the late stages of pregnancy are advised to get the RSV vaccine designed to protect newborns. Eligible newborns whose mothers have not received the RSV vaccine should receive nirsevimab between October and March.

For COVID-19, treatment must be prescribed by a healthcare provider and started within 5–7 days after symptoms appear. Treatment is strongly recommended for those who are over 65 or at [higher risk for severe illness](#). Some Illinoisans should be eligible to access free oral antivirals through the [Paxcess](#) and [Merck Helps](#) programs.

Antiviral treatments for flu are most effective when given within 48 hours of starting to feel ill and are only available by prescription. Older adults, young children and those who are pregnant or have [certain underlying conditions](#) are at risk for complications and should contact a healthcare provider to be assessed for the need for treatment as soon as possible.

You can find locations that perform COVID-19 tests in person at no cost near you by using the [testing locator](#) for the federal ICATT (Increasing Community Access to Testing) program. In addition, the federal government resumed offering free COVID-19 tests to every household through the [covidtests.gov](#) website.



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The new vaccines are widely available at pharmacies and through hospitals, and community health clinics. The major pharmacy chains allow you to make an appointment online to get a shot.

For help finding a provider of vaccines near you, go to www.vaccines.gov. Vaccine information is also available for Illinoisans who are uninsured or underinsured, and for children eligible for the [Vaccines for Children](#) program, through IDPH's [Vaccine Locator Dashboard](#).

Adults without insurance can also check with their local health department for options or contact a [free and charitable clinic](#) or a [Community Health Center](#).

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