

Emergency room visits for flu spike in Kane County, as respiratory illnesses pick up nationwide

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Following the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, flu is on the rise nationally, including in Kane County.

For the week ending on Jan. 4, nearly 15% of emergency room visits in the county were for the flu, COVID-19 or RSV, [according to](#) the Kane County Health Department. Out of all visits to emergency rooms in Kane County that week, 9.62% were for the flu.

Rates of influenza, COVID-19 and RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus, began ticking upward throughout December in Kane County. But data from the last week of December and first week of January reflects a sharp increase, particularly for the flu, which jumped from less than 2% of emergency room visits to more than 10% during December.

These numbers reflect data from all five of the Kane County hospitals: Rush Copley Medical Center in Aurora, Ascension Mercy medical center in Aurora, Northwestern Medicine Delnor Hospital in Geneva, Ascension Saint Joseph in Elgin and Advocate Sherman Hospital in Elgin.

Dr. Patrick Bilskey – the medical director of Rush’s Convenient Care outpatient clinics, overseeing satellite locations in Aurora, North Aurora, Oswego, Sugar Grove and Yorkville – said flu is accounting for the majority of the positive tests for respiratory illness his clinics are seeing, and he doesn’t anticipate the volume of cases letting up just yet.

“I would say starting early December we started climbing up the mountain, and I think we are still on the upswing,” Bilskey said. “I think we’re going to see more cases as we go throughout January, potentially peak end of January, early February. But it’s unpredictable.”

Dr. Santana Wheat, who practices family medicine at Northwestern Medicine Delnor Hospital in Geneva, also said she thinks area hospitals will see more flu cases in the coming weeks.

“With kids going back to school ... I do worry that we’ll see a little bit more continuing to go up as folks that had been traveling are coming back to school and back to work,” Wheat said.

Forty states, [including](#) Illinois, [are experiencing](#) high or very high rates of the flu according to the latest government health data. Nationwide, like in Kane County, the flu is trending significantly higher than other respiratory illnesses.

For example, during the week ending on Jan. 4, 18.9% of emergency room visits in Illinois were for acute respiratory illness (which includes the flu, COVID-19, RSV and other similar illnesses), [according to](#) the Illinois Department of Public Health, with 5.8% of emergency room visits for the flu during the week ending on Jan. 4.

To compare, emergency room visits because of the flu peaked at 5% last year in Illinois in late December.

In addition to emergency room visits, the Kane County Health Department also reported eight respiratory illness-related ICU admissions this past week alone, adding to a total of 41 for the season. They also reported one outbreak of the flu at an assisted living facility.

Emergency room visits for the flu are up in Kane County compared to last winter. At the end of 2023, the rate of patients coming in with flu-like symptoms was slightly more than 8% in Kane County, compared to more than 12% for both of the past two weeks. Not all patients who ultimately test positive for the flu, COVID or RSV exhibit flu-like symptoms.

RSV is also trending slightly higher compared to last year according to Kane County Health Department data, and COVID-19 is trending lower this winter compared to recent years.

There are a number of possible reasons for the spike in flu cases, said Michael Isaacson, executive director of the Kane County Health Department. He pointed to immunization rates in the county, the efficacy of the vaccine this year, potentially more severe strains of the flu and whether the illnesses going around are hitting groups, such as children, particularly hard.

"Also, over the last couple years, of course, we had COVID, which meant people were not around each other as much, so we actually saw much lower rates of influenza over the last several years," Isaacson said.

In Kane County, flu vaccination rates [are](#) at just over 25%, just above the state average, according to data from the Illinois Department of Public Health.

And while high vaccination rates in an area can help reduce the spread of flu, Wheat said it's only one component of a vaccine's efficacy.

"I have seen people with flu where they feel really bad and have missed a fair amount of work even that are vaccinated this year," Wheat said. "Every year, when they make the flu vaccine, they're kind of guessing. They don't know what the strain is going to be. And so, it

seems like this year it didn't help quite as well. We still have hope that it'll help for the second half of flu season, because usually we get another wave later."

Ascension Mercy in Aurora and Northwestern Medicine Delnor Hospital in Geneva both say they have not made changes to their masking policy in response to the increase in respiratory illness cases, but both continue to require masking in certain areas of the hospital.

"All hospital systems have kind of been back-and-forth on their masking policies," Bilskey said of Rush Copley and other area hospitals. "Going back a couple months, I think most institutions kind of loosened up on that policy. However, anticipating the upcoming respiratory-type illness season, we (Rush) actually reinstated – especially for our staff – that during any face-to-face encounter, the providers as well as patients are being masked during those times."

There are no specific medical treatments for RSV or other cold-type viruses, but there are anti-viral medications available for flu and COVID, which Bilskey recommends for high-risk patients. He recommended all individuals with these illnesses limit interactions with others for roughly five days and consider masking for a few days after. And he said individuals should monitor their symptoms and seek treatment if they worsen, rather than gradually improve, over the course of their illness, because it could be a sign of a complication or secondary infection like pneumonia.

As for what to do now if you think you've contracted a mild case of one of these respiratory illnesses?

"If there's no significant symptomatology – such as significant difficulty breathing or recurring vomiting where you can't take fluids – and patients are otherwise healthy, then it's OK just to treat those things symptomatically at home," Bilskey said.

And the traditional remedies still hold true, Wheat said.

"When I chat with my patients, I often tell them that the advice their grandma gave them is a good one," Wheat said. "Lots of fluid, warm showers, chicken soup. Taking medicine to help bring down your fever or to help with the body aches that go along with it. Those are all things that you can do at home."

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