CORONAVIRUS, INFLUENZA … FEEL MORE IN CONTROL THIS FALL

Each year, seasonal flu epidemics sicken millions of people, leading to hospitalizations and deaths. But, the 2020-21 influenza season will be unlike any other we have experienced in recent history because of the likelihood that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, will also be circulating. Thus far, COVID-19 has infected more than 25 million people worldwide and caused more than 850,000 deaths.

So what should you know and how can families take control of the situation?

What could be more complicated?

• **Confusion about whether a person is infected with influenza or COVID-19** — Since symptoms of influenza and COVID-19 are similar, and in both cases can range from no symptoms to severe illness, it may be difficult to differentiate one disease from the other without medical assistance. Symptoms caused by both viruses include fever, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, tiredness, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle pain or body aches, among others. Patients who normally may not have sought medical care may need to be tested to determine which infection they have. This will be more inconvenient and stressful for families and will further burden medical offices and testing centers that could already be spread thin.

• **Possible increased risk of one virus if infected with another** — At this point, we don’t know if people who are infected with flu are at increased risk for COVID-19 or vice versa. For example, when elderly people are infected with influenza, they sometimes appear to be recovering, only to get more severely ill a few days later. In these situations, they are often suffering from a second infection, such as pneumococcus. Time will tell whether infection with either influenza or SARS-CoV-2 will increase the risk for the other.

• **Possibility of overwhelming healthcare resources if both viruses are circulating at the same time** — Given that hospitals, healthcare providers and personal protective equipment (PPE) have been stretched thin during the pandemic, the presence of hundreds of thousands of additional patients infected with influenza at the same time that COVID-19 is occurring is of grave concern. Hospitals already pushed to the brink with COVID-19 patients may not have the capacity to accept patients who become severely ill with influenza.

What could help?

• **COVID-19 tactics** — Practices currently in place to protect against COVID-19, such as social distancing, hand hygiene and masking, will probably also help decrease the spread of influenza. Indeed, early data coming from countries in the Southern Hemisphere suggest lower than usual rates of influenza. This offers hope that the Northern Hemisphere may also be spared. However, it’s important to remain vigilant for the following reasons:
  • It remains unclear whether low numbers of influenza cases are due to COVID-19 prevention measures.
  • The U.S. has been less successful than other countries in getting large swaths of the population to practice these measures.
  • Influenza virus could change to become more infectious as it moves north.

• **Influenza vaccines** — Each year, many people choose not to get vaccinated against influenza, and although the vaccine typically does not prevent all cases of influenza, it affords some protection for those who are vaccinated. Given the fluidity of the situation with COVID-19 and the potential resource limitations, this year, it will be critically important to get the flu vaccine to protect yourself and your family. It will also be important to get vaccinated sooner than usual; public health officials are recommending vaccinations during September and October for everyone able to do so.

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What does this mean for me and my family?

You can take practical steps to prepare yourself and your family for the upcoming flu season during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Social distancing** — Continue practicing social distancing and limiting your family’s exposure to those who do not live in your household as much as possible.
- **Mask use** — Continue wearing a mask while in public or when sharing an indoor space with non-household members. A face mask offers protection not only for the person wearing it, but also for those around them.
- **Hand hygiene** — Encourage all family members to wash their hands frequently with soap and water to help decrease the spread of germs. If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- **Flu vaccination** — Get vaccinated. Vaccines against influenza are safe and effective in preventing severe disease and hospitalization. Everyone 6 months and older is recommended to be vaccinated.
- **Other vaccines** — Use the opportunity to go over other vaccines your family may need. Check “Age Groups and Vaccines” (https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/vaccine-education-center/age-groups-and-vaccines/adults) for more information, and discuss your family’s vaccine needs with your healthcare provider.

Taking these small steps can help you and your family members feel more in control during a time when all of us are experiencing uncertainty related to the pandemic and the upcoming flu season.

**NEWS AND NOTES**

**Virtual learning and vaccines**

You might be wondering whether your child needs vaccines if your school district has decided to go virtual for the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. The answer is yes for a few reasons. First, when schools reopen, you do not want your child to be behind on required vaccines and as a consequence be unable to attend. Second, schools are not the only reason why children should be vaccinated. Vaccinations protect your child, your family members and your community. Maintaining high levels of immunization contribute to community immunity, which helps protect those around you who can’t get vaccinated due to age, medical conditions or other reasons.

For more information, check out “Do kids need vaccines if they’re doing virtual learning or homeschool this fall?” by Shot of Prevention. (https://shotofprevention.com/).

**Thirty years protecting communities**

Congratulations to our colleagues at the Immunization Action Coalition (IAC) for 30 years of protecting communities throughout the country by providing immunization resources and guidance. IAC was recently featured in a 30-minute PBS documentary, hosted by Sam Waterston, titled Protecting Health: Saving Lives. The film describes the founding of IAC and why Dr. Deborah Wexler, the organization’s founder and director, continues to believe in the importance of immunization.

Watch the film (https://vimeo.com/418055088).

**New videos help parents prepare for their baby’s well visits**

Expecting a newborn or know someone who is? Boost Oregon, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing evidence-based vaccine education, recently released a video series to help new parents prepare for their baby’s well visits during the first year of life. Available in English and Spanish, each four- to six-minute video features Dr. Rachel Manzo, a pediatrician and a mom, describing the vaccines babies will receive as well as what to expect during a well visit and how to prepare.

The videos are available on Boost Oregon’s website (http://www.boostoregon.org/parent-resources).

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**Trivia Answer:**

The correct answer is B. The influenza vaccine is updated almost every year so that it protects against the strains of influenza virus predicted to circulate during that year.

Go to vaccine.chop.edu/trivia to play *Just the Vax*, the Vaccine Education Center’s trivia game, where you can find this question and others like it.