

Expect a different flu season: Why you'll want to be vaccinated for flu

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COVID-19 may be the most prominent virus of concern in the U.S. now, but public health officials also are preparing for seasonal influenza. And indications are it could be a different season than what the U.S. experienced the past two years.

The Australian flu season, which typically runs May through September,

has already exceeded its five-year average, particularly affecting children under age 5, according to a recent report.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. experienced a steep drop in influenza rates due to masking and social distancing measures. However, that has changed.

"Many have stopped masking," says Dr. Abinash Virk, an [infectious diseases](#) specialist at Mayo Clinic. "For the for the large part, we will see the reemergence of influenza in the winter. In comparison, in 2020 winter, when we were all masking and social distancing, there was literally no influenza. But now that has all changed."

Dr. Virk says that cases of influenza began to return as the masks came off. "We're going to get influenza this winter again, and people should seek out [influenza vaccination](#) when it becomes available in their local community," she says.

Seasonal influenza, like COVID-19, is a contagious respiratory illness that disproportionately affects adults ages 65 and older. However, they are not the same viruses. The similarity and differences of the two viruses also means it can be difficult to discern between the two when the symptoms overlap.

Prevention is best way to avoid confusion. Testing is the only way to be sure.

Testing helps limit spread, but it is particularly important for people at risk of severe influenza or COVID-19 so that they can then be treated with specific antiviral treatments available for these viruses.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that those 65 and older receive higher-dose, including [high-dose](#) and

recombinant vaccinations, or adjuvanted flu vaccinations over standard-dose unadjuvanted [flu vaccinations](#).

All people over the age of 6 months are encouraged to get their flu vaccination when available in their local community. The CDC recommends people are vaccinated for flu by the end of October to ensure they are fully vaccinated for the influenza season.

Along with vaccination, here are other steps you can take to protect yourself from influenza and other contagious viruses:

- Wash your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Use an alcohol-based sanitizer on your hands if soap and water aren't available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Avoid crowds when flu is spreading in your area.
- Avoid being in close contact with others who are sick.
- Cover your mouth with a tissue or your elbow when you cough or sneeze, and then wash your hands.
- Regularly clean and disinfect commonly touched surfaces, such as counters, light switches or doorknobs. This can prevent the spread of infection from touching a surface with the [virus](#) on it and then your face.
- Practice good health habits. Get [regular exercise](#), get enough sleep, drink plenty of fluids, eat a healthy diet, and manage your stress.
- Consider masking in crowded indoor locations, especially if you have [risk factors](#) for severe influenza or COVID-19.

If you become sick with the flu, you also can help prevent the spread of the flu by staying home and away from others. Continue staying home until your fever has been gone for at least 24 hours.

And a reminder that a flu shot doesn't protect people against getting infected with COVID-19 and getting vaccinated for COVID-19 doesn't protect people against getting the flu which is caused by a different virus, the influenza virus. Currently, a [combination vaccine](#) against [influenza](#) and COVID-19 is not available, so it's best to have both vaccines to have protection against both diseases. A combination vaccine may become available later this year.

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