

Keeping Seasonal Illnesses at Bay

Winter is quickly approaching. For people who live in the Midwest, it may even feel like winter is already here. This time of year consists of colder weather, traveling, holiday gatherings, family get-togethers, and more time spent cooped up indoors – all of which can become the perfect storm for seasonal illnesses to brew. This year, health experts are advising individuals to be extra diligent.

Flu season historically peaks between December and February each year. However, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an early increase in seasonal flu activity is happening nationwide – and it is estimated that just in the United States, there already have been at least 2.8 million cases, 23,000 hospitalizations, and 1,300 deaths.

This early and drastic spike in flu cases, combined with the current spread of other illnesses like [RSV](#) (respiratory syncytial virus), COVID-19, and the common cold, has people wondering what they can do to keep seasonal illnesses at bay this winter.

Lauren Petoskey, an OSF HealthCare family medicine physician assistant, says maintaining a well-balanced diet is important to help keep you healthy, especially during fall and winter months – but advises against making a trip to your local pharmacy to stock up on over-the-counter vitamins like zinc and vitamin C.

“As long as you have a generally healthy, well-balanced diet, you are going to be getting the majority of all those nutrients you need and all the vitamins and minerals. So overloading your body with them isn’t going to make your illness go away any quicker, or make you not have that exposure to the infection. There has been no research to prove that those are going to reduce any of the symptoms or reduce the risk of spreading germs or getting infected,” explains Petoskey.

Whenever seasonal illnesses are on the rise and people start to worry about getting sick, orange juice tends to become the beverage of choice for many. Not only is orange juice unable to prevent seasonal illness, it is also typically loaded with added sugars that can do more harm than good. But staying hydrated is important, so what is the best route?

“I encourage people to drink a lot of water just for their general health and for keeping the kidney functioning appropriately, and to keep their blood pressure down by eating healthy foods and avoiding high sodium intake. All those things are going to be good for general health,” Petoskey advises.

Catching a seasonal illness is not inevitable. What is inevitable is that at some point, especially during the winter months, you will come in contact with someone who has one. Even if you are a person who eats healthy whole foods every day, drinks plenty of water, gets a full eight hours of rest each night, and even exercises daily, these illnesses can unfortunately still be unavoidable. Luckily, there are still some things you can do to help protect yourself and your loved ones.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced the world to the importance of masking to the world. Although they can sometimes feel like a nuisance, masks are beneficial because they help contain any droplets and particles you breathe, cough, or sneeze out. While the mask mandate for prevention of COVID-19 spread has been lifted in most parts of the country, don’t ditch them just yet. Petoskey says masks can come in handy this fall and winter as reports of seasonal illnesses continue to rise.

“I think mask wearing is definitely going to help reduce exposures and spread of all sorts of different infections. Most viral infections are going to be spread through secretions – whether it be sneezing or coughing or wiping your nose – so if you have a mask on, it’s going to provide that barrier,” says Petoskey.

In addition to wearing a mask, Petoskey recommends getting both the latest [flu and COVID vaccines](#) if you haven’t already done so, along with being cautious about when and where you gather.

“Sometimes, it’s just inevitable that you’re going to have the exposure – like when you are at the grocery store or going to work – just those things that you normally do. But if you know there is somebody who is sick that will be at a party or an event that you’re going to, try to avoid those situations. And of course, getting vaccinated against the infections that we know are severe will help. We encourage everyone to get their flu vaccine and keep up to date on their COVID boosters. That way, your body already has that mounted immune response to be able to fight off the infection if you do get exposed to it,” Petoskey advises.

If you are not yet up to date with your seasonal flu shot and a COVID booster, it’s not too late. Talk to your health care provider about scheduling them. You can also get vaccinated at your local health department, state vaccine clinics, and retail pharmacies.

If you do come down with a seasonal illness this winter, stay home to reduce the spread of the illness. If symptoms worsen or do not go away, make an appointment with your primary care provider or a local urgent care. If symptoms become severe or life-threatening, go to the nearest emergency department or call 911.