

Diabetes and Staying Healthy this Winter

During the winter months there is typically a spike in seasonal illnesses such as common colds, flu, and pneumonia. This winter, cases of COVID-19 and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) are also on the rise. While there are tips and tricks for [keeping seasonal illnesses at bay](#), they are sometimes unavoidable. And for those with other health conditions, a simple cold can be so much more than that.

According to the American Diabetes Association (ADA), when someone who has diabetes gets sick with things like colds or the flu, the illness and stress cause their body to release hormones that raise blood sugar (blood glucose) levels, making it harder to keep their blood sugar in their target range. The ADA adds that while having diabetes in and of itself does not necessarily make someone more likely to get a cold or the flu, it does raise the chances of getting seriously sick. Some people may not even know they have diabetes until a severe illness occurs.

“If you have poorly controlled or undiagnosed diabetes and develop symptoms of something like the flu, you will have increased risk factors of severe illness. I would encourage those people to get quickly examined at an urgent care or their primary physician,” says Mohammed Khan, M.D., an OSF HealthCare family medicine physician.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) says that nearly a third of people with diabetes do not know they have it, and someone can go years before getting a diagnosis. The reason diabetes can fly under the radar is because the symptoms can be minor, especially early on.

“When patients have certain symptoms like more frequent urine and going to the restroom more often, losing weight, having lack of energy, having dry mouth, feeling thirsty and drinking more often, having recurrent infections like skin and urine infections – those are the things that indicate a screening for diabetes,” explains Dr. Khan.

He adds, “People who have diabetes sometimes ignore the symptoms and think they are not affected which is why it is a silent killer. The body is getting destroyed from the inside and many do not notice it unless you go to regular health exams or are screened for it. Diabetes is also one of the most common causes for chronic kidney disease. For a lot of people who develop problems like kidney failure or needing dialysis, the root cause for that most of the time is diabetes.”

Dr. Khan advises people who do have diabetes to keep it under control as best as possible, as well-controlled diabetes helps manage seasonal illnesses when they do occur. However, serious illness can still occur.

“With diabetes, your immune system goes down which is a risk factor. If you have diabetes, you want to make sure you are fully vaccinated and get the flu shot and are up to date on COVID vaccinations. If they are at a higher risk factor due to age and are in the age group to receive the pneumonia vaccination, we encourage get that as well, Dr. Khan advises.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends a pneumonia shot for anyone age two or older who, because of chronic health problems (such as diabetes) or age, has a greater chance of getting pneumonia, and urges all eligible individuals who are six months and older to get their annual flu shot.

If you have diabetes, have a kit on hand with the following items in it: A glucose meter, extra batteries, supplies for your insulin pump or continuous glucose monitor, ketone test strips, a week’s worth of glucose-lowering medication (but don’t store these longer than 30 days before use), glucose tabs or gels, and flu or cold medications that won’t disrupt your diabetes management.

If you do end up with a seasonal illness, keep track of your symptoms and let your primary doctor know if they get worse. If your symptoms become severe or unmanageable, go to the nearest urgent care or emergency department.

If you have not been diagnosed with diabetes but are exhibiting any possible signs and symptoms, make an appointment with your doctor.