

ThedaCare: Strongly recommends influenza immunizations and following COVID-19 precautions

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NEENAH, Wis. – With the Delta variant currently fueling an increase in COVID-19 infections, the nation and the Fox Valley are now facing a second flu season while coping with the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

“Getting people vaccinated for influenza will continue to be very important this year,” said

Jennifer Frank, MD, Chief Medical Officer of the ThedaCare Clinically Integrated Network.

“Additionally, it will be important that people pay close attention to COVID-19 activity in their area and follow the recommendations of local health organizations.”

Mask wearing, frequent hand washing, social distancing and avoiding large crowds in indoor spaces are the precautions being recommended again by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) during the current uptick in COVID-19 infections, and Dr. Frank urged everyone to follow the CDC’s advice.

“Those recommendations helped us avoid a catastrophic situation last fall when COVID-19 infections and seasonal flu cases could have overwhelmed our health care facilities even more than they already were,” Dr. Frank said. “Wearing a mask, social distancing, staying home when sick and frequent hand washing greatly reduced the incidence of respiratory flu

infections last year.”

Those same precautions are recommended again this fall, even if COVID-19 infections begin to decrease again. Dr. Frank also noted that testing is important.

“The symptoms of influenza and COVID-19 can be very similar,” explained Dr. Frank. “We encourage all people to be aware of their symptoms, and if recommended, be tested for COVID-19, influenza or both.”

A new Influenza SARS-CoV-2 (Flu SC2) Multiplex Assay test approved last fall more easily diagnoses whether a patient has Influenza A, Influenza B or COVID-19, giving health-care providers more information about how to treat their patients. In addition, it gives public health officials data to help control the spread of influenza and COVID-19 in their areas.

Easier Access to Vaccines

ThedaCare is now making it easier for patients to receive the COVID-19 vaccine by offering it at most of its primary care facilities, while continuing to operate vaccine clinics.

“Patients will be able to receive the COVID-19 vaccine during a wellness visit, such as an annual physical or a child’s sports physical or any other visit not associated with a significant illness,” said Dr. Frank. “Our goal is to ensure a smooth, easy process for all who choose to receive the vaccine.”

She noted that anyone aged 12 or over is currently eligible to receive the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, while anyone over the age of 18 can receive the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccines.

ThedaCare expects to receive its supply of influenza vaccines in early September, and those shots also will be available at its primary care facilities and pediatric clinics. ThedaCare patients and community members can schedule influenza

vaccines online through MyThedaCare/MyChart, by calling your provider's office or 920.830.6877.

"Medical experts believe it is safe for people to receive the COVID-19 vaccine at the same time they receive an influenza vaccine," explained Dr. Frank. "If someone has concerns about receiving the vaccines at the same time, they should speak with their primary care provider who can offer the best recommendation."

As for the influenza vaccine, Dr. Frank recommends getting the shot in September or October.

"September and October are good times to get vaccinated for the flu, as it takes two weeks for the vaccine to provide immunity," she said. "As long as the flu virus is circulating, those who haven't been vaccinated yet can do so into January or later."

The seasonal flu is typically active between October and April each year, peaking between December and February.

Dr. Frank noted that it's important to get the flu shot each year because the influenza virus is continually changing.

"Some years Influenza A is more active; other years it's Influenza B or the H1N1 virus," she said. "The composition of U.S. flu vaccines is reviewed annually and updated as needed to match the circulating flu viruses."

According to Dr. Frank, influenza can be a serious illness, especially for the very young, the very old, those with chronic health conditions and those who are pregnant. That's because those groups run the highest risk of developing a complication from the illness, which can lead to death.

"We all need to be very proactive this year about staying as healthy as possible to ward off the flu and prevent complications from the disease," she said. "We'd all like to think we are through the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reality is this is still a novel virus that scientists and medical professionals are continuing to learn

about. We all need to take extra steps to protect our health and the health of those around us. Getting a flu shot and getting vaccinated against COVID-19 are vital steps toward keeping us all healthy.”