

UW Health: Experts urgently encourage flu shots this fall

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MADISON, Wis. – Infectious disease experts are encouraging patients not to delay getting their influenza vaccine this year.

COVID-19 is not the only dangerous and deadly virus at play as winter approaches. The 2019-20 flu season included as many as 56 million influenza cases, around 740 thousand hospitalizations and up to 62 thousand deaths, according to CDC estimates.

Getting the influenza vaccine is as important as it has ever been, according to Dr. Jim Conway, pediatric infectious disease specialist and medical director, immunization programs, UW Health.

“Much like the COVID-19 vaccine, the influenza vaccine decreases the risk of illness and significantly reduces the risk of hospitalization and death,” he said.

The risk of hospitalization carries some extra weight this year too, according to Conway. As COVID-19 cases climb amidst this latest surge, so do hospitalizations. In some parts of the country hospitalizations are as high as they have been at any time during the pandemic. In Wisconsin they have risen significantly compared to rates recorded earlier in the summer.

Having as many people as possible get a flu shot is key to protecting people who are vulnerable, and key to avoiding overwhelming the health system and ensuring that hospital beds go to those who need it, he said.

“Getting a flu vaccine is never just about you,” Conway said. “It’s also about protecting the people around you who cannot get vaccinated or may not be fully protected by the vaccine for some reason.”

Experts are also still concerned about a “twindemic,” simultaneous high levels of COVID-19 and influenza.

“Symptoms can be similar, and transmission is similar as infection occurs through respiratory secretions,” Conway said. “Infection can lead to the need for more testing, isolation and missed work or school for those exposed to or exhibiting symptoms of either virus.”

Getting vaccinated against both influenza and COVID-19 as soon as possible is the best course of action, he said, and there is no problem with getting both vaccines and others needed at the same time

Most health systems and pharmacies are already offering flu vaccines. UW Health patients can schedule a flu vaccine via MyChart or by calling their primary care clinic.

A pre-recorded interview with Conway is available, and he is also available for interviews today.