ThedaCare: Encourages community members to take action against influenza and COVID-19

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APPLETON, Wis. – As we approach fall and winter months, health care leaders are urging community members to protect themselves – and loved ones – by staying up-to-date on vaccinations. Choosing to receive an annual influenza vaccine and a COVID-19 vaccine or booster can help protect our communities.

"The last two years have shown us the important role immunizations play in helping protect one another," said Dr. Mark Cockley, ThedaCare Chief Clinical Officer. "Immunizations, particularly for influenza and COVID-19, can greatly decrease the risk of becoming seriously ill or passing an infection to a loved one."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends getting the flu shot in September or October. The flu is typically active between October and April each year, peaking between December and February. According to Dr. Cockley, September and October are good times to get vaccinated, as it takes two weeks for the vaccine to provide immunity. However, as long as the flu virus is circulating, those who haven't been vaccinated yet can do so even into January.

"It is important to prepare for the upcoming flu season as there is the possibility of contracting the flu and COVID-19 simultaneously," said Dr. Cockley. "In addition, when mask use was more widespread, it helped keep cases of influenza down. This season, with masking less in place, there will likely be less protection, leading to a greater spread of flu and COVID-19."

The CDC advises that everyone 6 months and older get an annual flu shot. The vaccine is especially important for those at higher risk of becoming seriously ill.

That includes the elderly, pregnant women, young children and those with weakened immune systems and chronic diseases such as diabetes, lung diseases, high blood pressure, and those going through cancer treatment.

Continuing to Protect Against COVID
In addition to receiving an influenza vaccine, community members should plan to get boosted against COVID-19. People 12 and older are now eligible to receive updated COVID-19 boosters (also known as bivalent boosters).

"Everyone 6 months and older is recommended to get vaccinated to protect against COVID-19," said Dr. Cockley. "If you, your child or a loved one have not yet received a primary series of COVID-19 vaccines, it is still beneficial to do so."

The updated boosters have been authorized by the Food and Drug Administration and recommended by the CDC, and are the first Omicron-specific vaccines to be made available in the United States. They target the original strain of COVID-19, as well as the BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron subvariants. The highly contagious BA.5 Omicron subvariant is the dominant strain of COVID-19, making up about 90% of cases nationally.

The updated boosters are recommended as a single (1) dose for people 12 and older who have received their primary COVID-19 vaccine series and have not received a COVID-19 vaccine dose in the last two months. People 12 and older are eligible to receive the updated Pfizer COVID-19 booster, and those 18 and older are eligible to receive the updated Moderna COVID-19 booster. In these age groups, these boosters replace the original boosters. The Pfizer and Moderna updated boosters can be administered after any primary series, including Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, or Novavax.

Children ages 5-11 continue to be eligible for the original COVID-19 booster, which provides protection against the original strain of COVID-19. It is anticipated that this age group will be eligible for updated boosters in the coming months.

According to the CDC, children under the age of 5 should get a primary series dose of the vaccine.

"We all need to be very proactive about staying as healthy as possible to ward off the flu and COVID-19, and prevent complications from either disease," Dr. Cockley

said. "Getting a flu shot and COVID booster is an important part of our health plan."

Schedule Your Influenza Vaccine and COVID Booster
Health experts note people can safely get their COVID-19 vaccines and other vaccines at the same time, including the annual flu vaccine. ThedaCare is now making it easier for patients to schedule vaccinations by offering them at most of its primary care facilities. ThedaCare patients and community members can schedule influenza vaccines and COVID boosters online. Log in to MyThedaCare/MyChart, select Schedule a Visit, and then select Vaccines.

ThedaCare will also be holding a COVID booster clinic on Saturday, Oct. 1, from 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., on the second floor of ThedaCare Physicians-Appleton Gateway, 3925 N. Gateway Drive, Appleton, WI 54913. COVID boosters will be available at the free clinic. You do not need to be a ThedaCare patient to receive a vaccine. There will be 250 appointments available. Walk-ins are welcome, but if you want to preregister, you can do so at https://vaccinate.wi.gov. Pre-registering is strongly encouraged.