

Your Health Means Everything – Protect It by Getting Vaccinated for Flu Season

By Jennifer Burrell, Infection Preventionist at SageWest Health Care

Shorter days and cooler temperatures are tell-tale signs that autumn has arrived. Unfortunately, another sign of the season is the beginning of increased flu activity. Flu season can last from autumn to as late as May – peaking between December and February. According to a study published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), last year's flu cases were historically low, thanks in large part to widespread practice of safety measures to combat another widely-circulating respiratory illness – COVID-19 – including school closures, mask wearing and social distancing. With less common practice of those measures over the past several months, we could see an uptick in flu cases similar to prior years' levels. That potential – along with the continuing COVID-19 pandemic – makes it even more important that we each do what we can to minimize our risk, protect our health and protect the health of those around us. Getting vaccinated against the flu is a vitally important way to fight it.

Influenza (flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses and can cause mild to severe illness and even lead to death in certain situations. Everyone is susceptible to the flu, but individuals with a greater risk of developing complications from these viruses include children younger than five years old, adults 65 and older, pregnant women, residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, and those with certain medical conditions like asthma, heart disease and blood disorders.

At SageWest Health Care, one of the essential ways we're Making Communities Healthier is making sure that our neighbors understand how to fight preventable diseases like the flu. As we have all learned during this time, our health means everything and it has never been more important to protect it. And there are a few key ways you can protect yourself, your family and our community; prevent the flu from spreading; and even speed up your recovery if you do become ill.

First – and most importantly – **get vaccinated**. As we have witnessed this year with the safety and success of COVID-19 vaccines in protecting us from that vicious disease, flu vaccination is the single-best way to protect yourself from influenza viruses. While it is still possible to contract the flu after getting vaccinated, studies show that flu vaccinations can make your illness less severe if you do get sick. Getting vaccinated also affords you the peace of mind that comes from knowing that you're doing everything you can to protect yourself against the flu.

The CDC recommends annual flu vaccination for everyone six months and older, with any age-appropriate flu vaccine. If you are considering a nasal spray flu vaccine, it is important to know that this option is approved by the CDC for use in non-pregnant individuals, ages two through 49, and that there is a precaution against this option for those with certain underlying medical conditions. You should talk with your healthcare provider regarding which flu vaccination method works best for you.

Like COVID-19 vaccines, flu vaccines can take approximately two weeks to become fully effective, so you should plan to receive your flu vaccine before flu activity begins in your area. A good rule of thumb is to get vaccinated no later than the end of October.

And while we're on the subject of COVID-19 vaccines, if you have not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19, there's no better time than now – especially as COVID-19 cases continue to spread and the potential for flu activity increases. You can even conveniently get both vaccines on the same day, to save yourself time. If you have not been vaccinated against COVID-19 yet, ask about getting it when you get your flu shot. Being vaccinated against both viruses is your best defense against becoming infected with one or both of these diseases.

You can visit the Fremont County Public Health, a walk-in clinic or pharmacy, or your primary care provider's office to receive a flu vaccination. If you don't have a provider, we can connect you with one. Visit our website, and browse our Find a Doctor tab [SageWestHealthCare.com](https://www.sagewesthealthcare.com) or call 856.4161 or 332.4420.

In addition to getting vaccinated, there are other simple steps you can take to protect yourself and your family, and help prevent the spread of flu and other infections like COVID-19 during flu season and year-round, including:

- Washing your hands regularly with soap and water for 20 seconds, or using a hand sanitizer that is at least 60 percent alcohol-based
- Wearing a face mask in indoor, public spaces
- Avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- Avoiding sharing food, cups or eating utensils
- Regularly disinfecting your home and belongings, such as doorknobs, light switches, children's toys and play areas
- Staying home from school or work if you are sick to prevent the spread of germs
- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing with a tissue, your sleeve or elbow, and NOT your bare hands
- Calling your primary care provider with any questions

At SageWest Health Care, we're taking additional steps to help prevent the flu, COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses from spreading by:

- Implementing universal masking for patients, providers, employees, visitors and anyone entering our facility
- Setting up stations stocked with alcohol-based sanitizers, tissues and hands-free trash cans throughout our facility
- Continuing stringent cleaning and disinfection protocols
- Encouraging all patients, staff and visitors to get their flu and COVID-19 vaccinations

- Limiting visitation hours to help limit the spread of infection

If you or someone you know notices symptoms including coughing, sore throat, fever or other upper respiratory symptoms, please see your healthcare provider right away. Many of the most common symptoms of flu are consistent with COVID-19, so it may be hard to tell the difference between them. Testing may be needed to help confirm a diagnosis. Don't ignore your symptoms. Limit your contact with others as much as possible when symptoms appear, and stay home (or keep your child home) for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone, except to seek medical care (If you test positive for COVID-19, you may need to self-isolate for a longer period of time).

The good news is that when you act on your symptoms, visit a provider and flu is detected early, prescription antiviral drugs can often help treat the illness and shorten the time you are sick by one or two days.

If you have any questions or concerns about this year's flu season, we can help. Simply call 856.4161 or 332.4420.

For additional information about the 2021-22 flu season, visit the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/flu or contact the Fremont County Public Health at 856.6979 or 332.1073.