

What you should know about the flu season ahead

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has warned that this year's flu season could be especially rough. But in Chicago and many parts of the United States, current flu activity is extremely low. Should

we still be concerned?

While there's no need for alarm, "it's always prudent to expect a bad [flu season](#)," says John Segreti, MD, an infectious disease specialist and medical director of infection control and prevention at Rush University Medical Center. "One lesson I've learned about flu is that it's impossible to predict."

Reasons for concern about flu this year

According to Segreti, this flu season could be worse than the past few years when people were taking extra precautions because of COVID-19. "People are much less adherent with masks and social distancing than they were two years ago or even last year," Segreti says. "Immunity is also lower because there hasn't been a big flu season for the past two years, and fewer people are getting vaccinated against the flu."

The fact that Australia and New Zealand just finished up their worst flu season in years is also concerning because it may foretell what happens in the United States. Still, that doesn't necessarily mean we will have a bad flu season here at home, Segreti says.

"Other areas in the Southern Hemisphere like South America did not experience a terrible flu season," he says. "So, there are a lot of unknowns. It depends on how many people get vaccinated and how well the vaccine is paired with the strains that will eventually circulate."

Matchmaking in the vaccine world

The World Health Organization determines which influenza strains to include in each season's flu shot, based on the previous season. This year's shots include two influenza A and two influenza B strains, based

on the top strains circulating in January 2022.

"Unfortunately, we can't tell if it's a good match until after the season has begun, and sometimes, the flu virus changes so we might get new strains in the middle of the season," Segreti says.

So why get flu shots if there's a chance the vaccines aren't a good match?

"During years when we have a bad match, the flu vaccine offers some protection against getting influenza, but it also offers protection against hospitalization and death," Segreti says. "So, even in years when the virus and the shots aren't well matched, it still makes sense to get the flu vaccine."

Older adults should get high-dose flu shots

The CDC recommends everyone 6 months and older receive a flu shot. The agency also now advises people 65 and older to get one of the following three vaccines because they contain a higher dose of antigens against the flu or an ingredient called an adjuvant that creates a stronger immune response:

- Fluzone
- Flublok
- Fluad

Although high-dose and adjuvanted vaccines have been around for several years, this is the first time that the CDC specifically recommends them for older adults. "These high-dose vaccines have proven to be more effective than standard-dose vaccines in people 65 and older," Segreti says. "In older people, the higher dose seems to boost the body's immune response to the [vaccine](#). And there are some studies that have shown that the high-dose vaccines are more effective than standard-dose vaccines in [older people](#), especially in preventing hospitalization and death."

You can find locations near you that offer [high-dose](#) flu vaccines on Vaccines.gov.

No need to spread out your COVID booster and flu shot

The best time to get your flu shot is before the end of October. If you're eligible, you can get an updated COVID-19 booster during the same visit to your doctor or pharmacy.

"There's no reason to wait any particular duration of time between getting the [flu vaccine](#) and a COVID booster if they're both available at the same time," he says. Just be prepared to roll up both of your sleeves so you can get a shot in each arm.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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