

Survey finds many Americans are letting their guard down during respiratory illness season

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A new national survey by The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center finds a third of Americans believe their decision on whether or not to get vaccinated for seasonal illnesses like COVID and the flu does not affect anyone else. Credit: The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center

Despite the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warning this year will be potentially dangerous for respiratory illnesses, a third of Americans are not concerned about the threat, according to a new national survey by The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center.

The survey found that while the majority of those polled (87%) said they do everything they can to avoid spreading seasonal viruses, one third think their vaccine decision doesn't affect others and that they don't need vaccines for the flu or COVID-19 if they're not at high risk.

"Unfortunately, [respiratory viruses](#) can cause really severe and life-changing disease for some people, even among the young and very healthy. The best way to help prevent a virus from really upending your life or others is to get vaccinated. Our vaccines are safe and very effective in preventing you from getting very sick and that's an important outcome," said Megan Conroy, MD, a pulmonologist and critical care specialist at the Ohio State Wexner Medical Center and clinical assistant professor in the College of Medicine.

Along with the flu and [respiratory syncytial virus](#) (RSV), COVID-19 has become part of the respiratory virus season, resulting in strain on the health care system. The CDC projects the total number of hospitalizations will be higher this year than in seasons before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Unfortunately, the flu kills tens of thousands of Americans every year. We get an idea of how bad a respiratory illness season the U.S. will have by looking at what happened in the southern hemisphere where flu season is during our summer. Australia had almost a record setting influenza season. That's concerning and a sign that we may have higher flu numbers than average and certainly higher than in recent years since universal masking has gone by the wayside," Conroy said.



Pulmonologist Megan Conroy, MD, encourages her patients at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center to get their recommended vaccines. With a potentially dangerous cold and flu season ahead, she says it is no time for Americans to let their guard down against seasonal respiratory illnesses like the flu, COVID, RSV and pneumonia. Credit: The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center

Who should get a vaccination

When it comes to flu and COVID-19 vaccinations, it's recommended everyone six months and older get both vaccines every season with rare exceptions. It's safe to get both at the same time, and clinical trials are underway on whether both vaccines can be combined into a single shot, Conroy said.

For RSV, the recommendation is vaccination for adults age 60 and older and those pregnant during weeks 32 through 36 of their pregnancy from September to January. There is a new tool to help protect babies in their first RSV season—an immunization directly with an antibody to protect from RSV. This is not a vaccine but man-made protein that mimics antibodies that the body naturally makes in response to vaccines. RSV can develop into other conditions like bronchiolitis and pneumonia.

A pneumonia vaccination is recommended for adults age 65 or older, those age five to 64 who are at increased risk for pneumonia due to chronic heart or [lung disease](#) or weakened immune systems and children younger than five.

"Whenever we have more virus in the community, it's likely that we'll

also see more bacterial and viral pneumonia, and it can cause [severe illness](#) in people of all ages," Conroy said. "Keeping your guard up about [respiratory illnesses](#) is important because they're going to be here every year. There are so many things you can do to mitigate the spread of viruses. Get your vaccination, stay home if you're sick, avoid those who are sick and wear a mask if you're going out and not feeling well. All of these things can help prevent you from getting sick or spreading it to others."

Two years later, 29-year-old still recovering from COVID-19

Joe James, 29, of Mansfield, Ohio, wasn't concerned about respiratory illness season until he got COVID-19 two years ago. He hadn't gotten the vaccine because he was young and didn't have any pre-existing health problems.

For the first few days, it felt like the flu but when he woke up on the seventh day short of breath, he knew something was terribly wrong. He drove himself to the hospital where it was discovered that his oxygen saturation level was in the mid 70s. A normal reading is between 95% and 100% and anything below that is hypoxemia, which can be fatal.

"They said 'Who drove you here?' I said 'I drove myself.' I was perplexed by the question because I didn't know what mid 70s meant. I thought I was just a little short of breath. They said 'You shouldn't even be having this full on conversation right now,'" James said.

James was admitted to the [intensive care unit](#) at a local hospital and life flighted weeks later to Ohio State as his condition continued to deteriorate. He was ventilated, had a thoracotomy (a surgery opening up the chest) and at one point his oxygen saturation level dropped into the teens.

"Joe had just about the worst go of it with COVID and to come out on the other side and be alive is really amazing," Conroy said. "It came on really suddenly for him and, unfortunately, he had so many complications including his lungs failing from the COVID pneumonia and really bad bacterial pneumonia that led to an abscess of his lung and complications. His lung took a really, really long time to heal. He spent over 200 days in the hospital before he got home."

Two years later, James is still recovering from his illness, using supplemental oxygen and wearing braces on his legs to help him walk after he developed peripheral neuropathy while on the ventilator.

"At one point Joe was so weak that he could barely lift his toes or hands and it took a really intense amount of rehab to recover from. Thankfully Joe survived and made it through such a long and terrible journey after COVID," Conroy said.

Study results and methodology

This study was conducted on behalf of The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center by SSRS on its Opinion Panel Omnibus platform. The SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus is a national, twice-per-month, probability-based survey. Data collection was conducted from Oct. 20-23 among a sample of 1,007 respondents.

The survey was conducted via web (n=977) and telephone (n=30) and administered in English. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. All SSRS Opinion Panel Omnibus data are weighted to represent the target population of U.S. adults ages 18 or older.

Provided by Ohio State University Medical Center

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