

Long flu season winds down in US

April 26 2024, by Mike Stobbe



A sign for flu vaccination is displayed outside of a grocery store in Glenview, Ill., Thursday, Feb. 15, 2024. On Friday, April 26, 2024, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said last week, for the third straight week, medical visits for flu-like illnesses dipped below the threshold for what's counted as an active flu season. Credit: AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh

The U.S. flu season appears to be over. It was long, but it wasn't

unusually severe.

Last week, for the third straight week, medical visits for flu-like illnesses dipped below the threshold for what's counted as an active flu season, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday.

Other indicators, like hospitalizations and patient testing, also show low and declining activity. No state is reporting a high amount of flu activity. Only New England is seeing the kind of patient traffic associated with an active flu season right now, but even there flu impact is considered modest.

Since the beginning of October, there have been at least 34 million illnesses, 380,000 hospitalizations and 24,000 deaths from flu, according to [CDC estimates](#). The agency said 148 children have died of flu.

CDC officials called that a "moderate" flu season, an assessment shared by other doctors.

Even at the peak, "we felt strained but never over-capacitated" said Dr. Jay Varkey, infectious disease physician at Atlanta's Emory University Hospital.

"It felt more like a traditional respiratory virus season than when we had massive upswings of COVID confounding it," he added.

For much of the season, most illnesses were attributed to a milder flu strain, and one that officials say was well matched to the seasonal flu vaccines. Preliminary data presented in February suggested the vaccines were around 40% effective in preventing adults from getting sick enough from the flu that they had to go to a doctor's office, clinic or hospital.

COVID-19 illnesses seem to have peaked at around the same time as flu.

So too did illnesses caused by another respiratory virus, RSV.

CDC [data](#) indicates coronavirus-caused hospitalizations haven't hit the same levels they did at the same point during the last three winters. Earlier this year, COVID-19 was putting more people in the hospital than flu. But right now the hospitalization rates are about the same, CDC [data](#) shows.

Although the season wasn't particularly bad, it was long—and springtime upticks in flu are always possible.

COVID-19 scrambled the ways health officials track respiratory viruses.

The agency used to count the number of weeks of elevated visits to doctor's office for flu-like symptoms, but COVID-19's flu-like symptoms muddied that up. Now, the agency focuses on the number of weeks that a high percentage of specimens tested positive for flu.

Under the new measure, the 2023-24 flu season was 21 weeks long. Under the previous measure, flu seasons before the COVID-19 pandemic tended to run between 11 and 21 weeks.

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