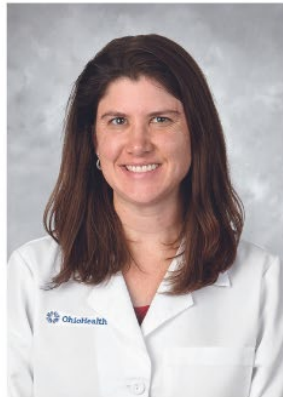


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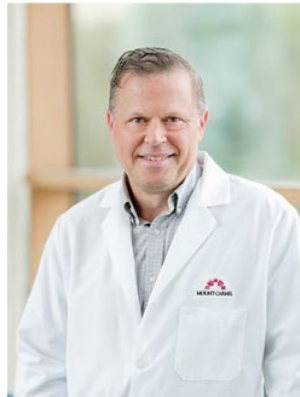
It is coughing, wheezing and sneezing season. Here's how to protect yourself



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We've entered the time of year when we see more patients in our offices and emergency departments with coughs and other breathing issues.

We're infectious disease physicians at central Ohio's four hospital systems, and we care for those patients whose viral infections such as flu, RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) or COVID-19 worsened or advanced to pneumonia and other serious health conditions.

Many of the patients we see were not immunized when they could have been.

Why you should get vaccinated

National Influenza Vaccine Week — Dec. 4 to 8 — serves as a reminder to make sure your seasonal vaccines are up to date, especially for flu and COVID-19.

It can take a couple of weeks after your shot for your body to build sufficient protection. If you vaccinate now, you'll be in good shape to fight off these infections which might be present at holiday gatherings or during year-end travel.

Being vaccinated also makes you less likely to pass disease to others.

With flu season typically peaking in February and March, there's still time to get your influenza vaccine.

It's a common misconception that seasonal vaccines protect you from catching the disease entirely. That's not their primary benefit.

A vaccine makes sure your body is equipped to fight a virus when it appears; and if you do catch one, to keep your symptoms mild.

Without vaccination, an infection can send you to the hospital, and in extreme cases, kill you.

We've seen this pattern for decades with the flu, and we clearly saw it during the COVID-19 pandemic, although it was not easy to accurately predict the outcome. Vaccinated individuals mostly had mild symptoms.

Those who were not vaccinated had varied outcomes: some had mild cases, while others experienced severe illness, and many lost their lives.

What you need to know about the RSV vaccine

A vaccine for RSV was approved this year, and is recommended for people aged 60 and over.

Although most cases of RSV infection are mild, older adults especially those with underlying health issues, such as heart and lung disease or a weakened immune system, are at higher risk for serious infection and complications.

If you're over age 60, discuss the RSV vaccine with your family physician, and find out if your insurance plan covers it, since not all do yet.

A new shot containing protective antibodies was approved this year to prevent RSV in those infants aged 8 months and younger prior to Nov. 1.

However, supply is limited for this respiratory season.

Vaccines are not just for the person who gets the poke.

We're all members of many communities — our families, friends, work teams, clubs, and church groups.

We also interact with dozens of other people each day: at the grocery, school, gym, and our favorite stores and restaurants.

We have a responsibility to them, too.

No one wants to be the person who exposed someone else to the flu or COVID.

Vaccines protect you, and everyone around you, which is very important if one of your personal communities includes older adults and those with at-risk conditions. If you're a caregiver for an elderly parent, relative or friend, your vaccinations are especially beneficial.

What role do parents and children play in spreading infections?

Children are the most potent and efficient carriers of infection, especially these seasonal respiratory illnesses such as flu, RSV and COVID-19.

Parents, make sure your children are appropriately vaccinated. The rest of us should get vaccinated as well, if we plan to attend holiday activities or travel where children are present.

Are vaccinations safe? How do we know?

Today's vaccine supplies are plentiful, safe and effective.

The flu and pneumonia vaccines have been used for decades, and the COVID vaccines have been in use enough years now to prove their safety and effectiveness as well.

These vaccine shots do not contain live virus, so you can't contract an infection from its vaccine. You may hear some people say they 'got sick from the vaccine,' but as physicians, we can tell you this is not possible.

Some people may feel sick with low grade fever, achiness, and fatigue for a day or two after the vaccine.

This can happen, but that only means their immune system is responding as it should.

If a person comes down with actual flu a day or two after their flu shot, they're a victim of unfortunate timing, having been exposed to the virus before their shot, and before their body had a chance to strengthen its immunity.

How do I get a vaccination?

We encourage you to talk to your family physician if you have questions about the immunizations you need at this time of year (and your pediatrician for questions about your children).

You can find more information about vaccines online from Columbus Public Health (<https://bit.ly/3QPEDkk>), Franklin County Public Health (<https://bit.ly/3RiyBdG>), the Ohio Department of Health (<https://bit.ly/3R5wiuk>) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://bit.ly/3syYdcJ>).

You can get your flu and COVID-19 booster shot at most grocery-store pharmacies and free-standing drug stores, in addition to each hospital system's primary care and urgent care locations. Call ahead to be sure, but in most cases, the shots are free to you, and you don't need an appointment. Just walk in with your insurance card and photo ID. Our Public Health departments have instructions on where to go for vaccinations if you don't currently have health insurance (visit their websites above).

If you haven't received your seasonal vaccines yet this year, please make a plan today to get them in the next week or so, to protect yourself and your communities. If you can, go with someone you care about, so they get theirs, too.

As much as we love our jobs and our patients, we would prefer not to see you in the hospital this winter, especially if your illness could have been prevented.

And we know that's not where you want to spend your days either. Don't delay. Prioritize your health and the well-being of those you encounter by getting vaccinated today.