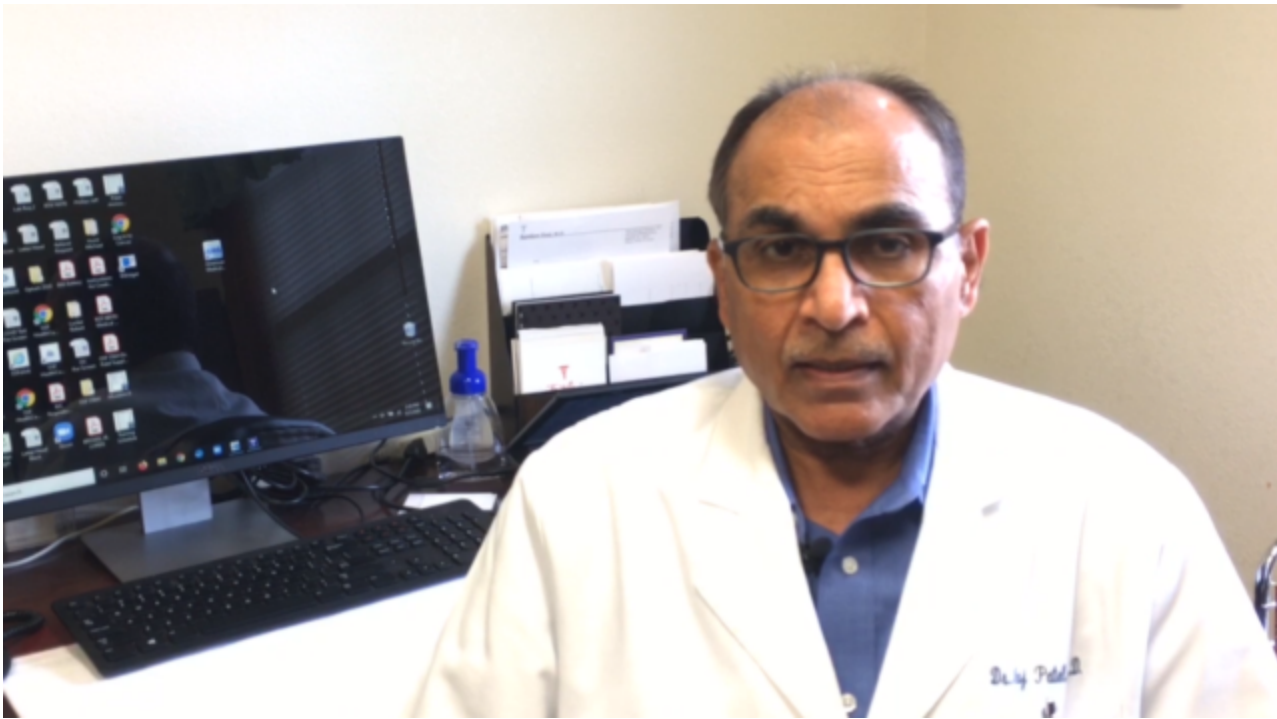


# How to Stay Healthy Now – Get Vaccinated Health Leaders Worry About Falling Rates

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ALTON - There's a lot of time, energy and money going into developing a vaccine against COVID-19. Until that happens, health leaders say it's even more important, particularly for older adults, to get the vaccines that are available.

Approximately 40,000 to 50,000 adults in the US die from vaccine-preventable illnesses or their complications each year and there's fear it could be worse this year because many people have not left their homes for routine medical care for months because of COVID-19.

From measles and mumps to influenza (flu) and pneumonia, vaccines are one of the most effective public health tools to prevent a variety of serious diseases. With cases of COVID-19 continuing to surge, OSF HealthCare physician Raj Patel says we can't forget about the upcoming flu season. He points out with every flu season, there's a rise in hospitalizations and the need for respiratory support, and that could lead to strained resources. Dr. Patel says it's important to prevent flu and other respiratory diseases as much as possible this season.

"Our health resources are already stretched and if people get pneumonia or now with the season coming, influenza if they don't take the vaccine, then they'll end up in the hospital with (potentially) other complications also so it's very important that people get their necessary vaccinations," Dr. Patel advises.

## **Vaccine Rates Have Fallen**

Studies have found that vaccine rates have dropped dramatically across all age groups during COVID-19, with demand plummeting as much as 95% for some vaccines.

During National Immunization Awareness Month, everyone is encouraged to make sure their immunizations are up to date. This assessment tool from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) can help you determine which ones you need. But, the best approach is to see a primary care provider who knows your medical and family history and can help you stay on schedule for immunizations.

It is especially important for adults to stay current if they have a chronic health condition that weakens the immune system, making it's less able to fight off viruses, including COVID-19. Dr. Patel says getting a pneumonia shot doesn't prevent COVID-19 but it can help protect against getting really sick with other types of viruses, such as influenza.

“You don't want to catch pneumonia and that will affect your immune system and make you more susceptible to the COVID infection so definitely a person should take the required pneumonia vaccine.”

Anyone who has ever had shingles knows the blistering, painful rash can have lasting complications. You can also get it more than once, so Dr. Patel says anyone over 50 should consider a shingles shot. He points out everyone's immune system gets weaker as they age.

“Whenever your immune system goes down, the chickenpox virus gets reactivated and develops a rash of shingles which is very painful and debilitated and I think that's why people should take the shingle vaccine, to prevent that,” he recommends.

There are currently two vaccines available for shingles. Check with your provider about the best option for you.

Much like wearing a mask protects others around you, Dr. Patel says being vaccinated against infectious diseases - including highly contagious measles - keeps the community and loved ones near you safer.

He stresses, “When the community as a whole has immunity, there's less chance of getting preventable disease and spreading the disease so it's very important individuals are vaccinated so that other people can benefit from that protection.”

It is possible to have the flu, as well as other respiratory illnesses, and COVID-19 at the same time. That's all the more reason to get all available vaccines, especially as flu season approaches.

Dr. Patel says between mid-September to early October is the best time to get a flu shot because that'll ensure you're protected by the height of the flu season, typically peaking between December and February. Some years the season has extended through March, so even if you miss the early window, don't worry, the important thing is to get vaccinated. Last flu season, fewer than half (47%) of all Americans received a flu shot.