

Coping With COVID During The Holidays

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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS - With COVID hospitalizations on the rise in Illinois, physicians, nurse practitioners and providers with HSHS Medical Group, Prairie Cardiovascular, HSHS St. Elizabeth's Hospital in O'Fallon, Illinois and St. Joseph's Hospitals in Breese and Highland understand the community may have many questions

and concerns around holiday gatherings. As a leading health care source for our region, clinicians encourage community members to understand the facts about the current COVID-19 environment and incorporate safety measures into their holiday plans.

Based on publicly reported numbers from our area health departments, COVID positive cases have been on the rise since Thanksgiving. Chief Medical Officer for St. Elizabeth's and both St. Joseph's hospitals Vinay Bhooma, MD, said, "Larger hospitals in our region are seeing more COVID-19 patients, the majority unvaccinated, needing to be admitted. In addition, unvaccinated COVID-19 patients typically have longer stays in the hospital compared to those vaccinated."

What about Delta, Omicron, and flu season?

"IDPH and the CDC are watching the Omicron variant closely, but it's still too early to know if it causes more severe illness. Right now, Delta is by far the predominant COVID strain in Illinois," says James M. Bock, MD, chief physician executive for HSHS Medical Group.

"The best gift you can give your loved ones this Christmas is to get the vaccine or the booster," says Dr. Bock. "The vaccine lowers your chance of severe illness and hospitalization. Winter is also flu season, so the flu shot would be a great addition to your wish list. You don't want to get COVID and flu at the same time."

If you are already vaccinated and it has been at least six months, consider getting the COVID booster to help increase your antibodies. After you get your booster protection builds quickly over a few weeks. If you get a booster now, you will have a week's start on that immunity building before Christmas.

The [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) and [Illinois Department of Health \(IDPH\)](#) offer several tips for celebrating safely.

When to get tested:

Even if you do not have symptoms, IDPH recommends you get tested for COVID if you work in a high-risk setting or have been exposed to someone with COVID before gathering with family and friends. Stay home if you are positive. This helps protect loved ones at higher risk for severe disease, such as the elderly, those with compromised immune systems, and children younger than five years old who are not yet eligible for vaccination.

"Testing for COVID protects those closest to you and ultimately our entire community," says Dr. Bock. "Our goal is to prevent severe illness and death. Even if you don't have

symptoms, you could have COVID and spread it to others. Get tested if you have symptoms or have been exposed to someone who has tested positive. If you aren't sure if you should be tested, give your doctor a call and they can advise you.”

The CDC provides extensive testing guidance on their [website](#).

How to safely gather and travel:

Some may have noticed illness spread through their family and friend groups after gathering for Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, this isn't a surprise to medical professionals. Colder weather and holidays are bringing us indoors and closer to others, increasing the risk of exposure to COVID and even other winter illnesses, like flu and strep.

IDPH says it's best to keep indoor gatherings to a few people in a well-ventilated space that is large enough to accommodate social distancing, especially when eating. Allow some space when lining up for a buffet or serve filled plates to seated guests. Consider wearing masks if you have unvaccinated family present. Wash your hands frequently.

Traveling requirements could change quickly as CDC evaluates ongoing COVID risks. Before you make plans, review requirements for domestic and international travel on the [CDC website](#).

What to do if you're sick in the next few weeks:

If you are sick between now and New Year's, keep these precautions in mind as you approach holiday celebrations.

- Get tested so you and your doctor understand the source of your symptoms and can treat them appropriately.
- If you do not have severe COVID or a weakened immune system, [CDC guidance](#) says you can leave quarantine and be around other people:
 - 10 days since symptoms first appeared and
 - 24 hours with no fever without the use of fever-reducing medications and
 - other symptoms of COVID are improving

Be kind to yourself. COVID recovery can take time, even when you are no longer contagious. If you're feeling tired, ask for help with groceries, holiday cooking, or wrapping presents.

Where to find a COVID test, vaccine, or booster:

Visit [HSHS Medical Group's website](#) for information on our drive-thru locations for COVID testing and vaccines. If appointments are full, check again later as additional times are added. You can also find testing and vaccines at local pharmacies and through the county health department and at [vaccines.gov](#).