

Seasonal Respiratory Viruses Continue to Impact Illinois Following the Holidays

by Michael Claffey
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CHICAGO – While more than half of the counties in Illinois remain at an elevated level for COVID-19 hospitalizations according to CDC data, the state's overall

respiratory illness level has decreased in recent weeks and is at [Low](#) in the most recent available data, the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) announced.

The CDC's latest update of its [COVID Data Tracker](#) indicates that as of the week ending January 13, the state of Illinois is at Medium level for COVID-19 hospitalizations for a fourth straight week with a total of 1,393 hospitalizations reported during the week. A total of 54 counties were at an elevated level for COVID-19 hospitalizations with 50 of those at Medium level (between 10 and 20 COVID-19 hospitalizations per 100,000 of population) compared to 57 counties the previous week. Four counties were at High level (more than 20 hospitalizations per 100,000) compared to seven the previous week.

IDPH notes that only about 24% of adult Illinoisans are up to date on their COVID-19 vaccine per the [CDC's National Immunization Survey](#).

While respiratory illness activity appears to have peaked and is now trending downward, it is important to remember that respiratory virus season can last into the spring and additional increases in illness rates are still possible. IDPH has also confirmed this week that there was a third pediatric death due to influenza, all with December onsets. This is a sobering reminder of the potential severity of influenza in children and the importance of vaccination.

“Although I am happy to report that Illinois’s overall respiratory illness activity is currently trending downward, respiratory viral season is still upon us with more than half of our counties still experiencing elevated levels of COVID-19 hospitalizations,” said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra. “If you develop respiratory symptoms, please contact your health care provider, and seek treatment as quickly as possible. We have effective treatments for COVID-19, the flu, and RSV. These treatments are especially important and can prevent severe disease for those with underlying medical conditions.”

Director Vohra noted that those who have health coverage through Medicare and Medicaid as well as those who are uninsured are able to receive PAXLOVID – a highly effective treatment for COVID-19 - at no charge through the federal Patient Assistance Program.

If people develop symptoms of a respiratory illness – including coughing, sneezing, sore throat, a runny nose or fever – IDPH recommends staying home and away from others to avoid spreading illness. If you need to seek medical care, you should wear a mask to limit the risk to others – or try to schedule a telehealth appointment. In addition, public health experts urge anyone who has been recently exposed to COVID-19 or other respiratory viruses to wear a mask when in crowded areas, and if visiting someone at high risk for severe disease. For more on when and where to use a mask, [click HERE](#).

The [updated COVID-19 shots](#) are effective against the currently dominant COVID-19 variants and are recommended for all people 6 months and older. People with egg allergy may now get any [flu vaccine](#) (egg-based or non-egg-based) that is otherwise appropriate for their age and health status and do not need to limit themselves to non-egg based shots alone. Those older than 65 years should receive any one of the higher dose or “adjuvanted” influenza shots. The [RSV shots](#) are now available for those over 60 years and pregnant people. Older adults with [risk factors for RSV](#) should talk to their provider about which shot is right for them. The pneumonia (pneumococcal) shots are also recommended for children, people with weakened immune systems and older adults and will protect people from getting seriously ill with the type of pneumonias that often follow viral infections.

To help keep the public informed about conditions around the state, IDPH recently launched an [Infectious Respiratory Disease Surveillance Dashboard](#) that will be updated weekly on Fridays. This report provides the public the latest data on hospital visits, seasonal trends, lab test positivity and demographic data.

IDPH launched a new awareness campaign this fall called [‘Tis the Sneezin’](#) to remind Illinoisans that vaccinations provide the best protection against the triple threat of COVID-19, flu and RSV.

Every household in the U.S. is eligible to receive four free at-home tests through the [COVID.gov](#) website. IDPH has also made available a single swab triple-test for Flu /RSV and Covid-19, at no cost, to high risk congregate care settings and local health departments.

For those who are uninsured or under-insured, the CDC launched the [Bridge Access Program](#) last year that covers the cost of COVID-19 vaccines. The [Vaccines for Children Program](#) covers all ACIP recommended vaccines for eligible children, including nirsevimab for RSV protection.

For treatment of COVID-19, Illinoisans who experience symptoms can access no cost-share telehealth services through the [SIU School of Medicine Covid Test to Treat](#) services or call (217) 545-5100. An additional option is the [NIH Test to Treat line](#) or call 1-800-682-2829 to get access to no-cost care.

The federal government has established a website that provides an all-purpose toolkit with information on how to obtain masks, treatment, vaccines and testing resources for all areas of the country at: <https://www.covid.gov/>.