

Do your part, get your flu shot!

During this flu season it is more important than ever to do your part to help protect you and those around you from this deadly illness. The flu season in our region typically begins at the end of October and lasts through April. The sooner you get your flu shot, the better you will be prepared for it. This is even more concerning given the combination of the ongoing COVID pandemic and a busy flu season. This combination could easily overwhelm the healthcare system.

Many respiratory viruses, including both influenza and COVID-19, have similar symptoms including cough, sore throat, shortness of breath and fever. The hallmark of the flu is sudden onset and intense muscle aches, which is not typically the case with COVID-19 or other respiratory illnesses. While COVID-19 has a similar set of symptoms, some patients experience a rapid deterioration from a respiratory perspective which is less common with the flu.

Because the spread of COVID-19 is so dangerous, this year, people with cold-like symptoms will set in motion the same enhanced protective protocol we use with COVID-19 until we have proven that it is not COVID-19. This means that a lot of the precautions we took at the hospital to protect our patients, staff and the public during the original pandemic will return such as limiting visitors to reduce disease spread. This may also affect the ability of some outpatient clinics to care for respiratory patients given the protective protocols needed and the limitations of the offices.

Every year our community relies on its numerous healthcare partners to manage most flu cases. If we cannot appropriately care for cases of respiratory illness in outpatient clinics due to the threat of COVID-19, a large percentage of these cases may instead be referred to urgent care and the Emergency Department. This large increase in volume would tax our resources both in the emergency department and the lab which could lead to increased wait times of these critical services and decreased resources to care for patients who are in need of emergency care.

While the flu shot is not designed to prevent 100% of flu cases, it does dramatically reduce the likelihood of getting the flu and makes the symptoms far less severe. Also, the flu shot cannot give you the flu, but you may feel mild symptoms after the shot, and this is normal. Following a vaccination, the immune system responds as if it was exposed to the virus. This can often cause fatigue and muscle aches, especially at the injection site. The point of the flu shot is to cause the immune system to arm itself with antibodies targeted against the flu so that if you are then exposed to the flu, the immune system has the right weapon available to target and eliminate the virus quickly. Without a vaccine, your immune system is not armed against the flu and it will take far longer to make antibodies to clear the illness. This causes the virus to spread farther and causes more symptoms, some of which can be life threatening.

Preventative measures are equally effective against the flu so we are encouraging everyone to double down and continue to remain vigilant in these efforts. By now we all know the proper preventative measures by heart: frequent handwashing, physical distancing, wearing a face mask and staying home if you feel ill. Certainly, getting the flu and COVID-19 together would be an extremely dangerous combination for anyone so it is important to remain diligent with these measures to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our community. It takes about two weeks for the flu vaccine to reach full effectiveness so get your flu shot as soon as you can. The sooner you get it, the sooner you are protected for the entire flu season.

My hope, and the hope of my colleagues, is that we will have a mild flu season because we are all getting our flu shots as soon as possible and are remaining vigilant with masking, social distancing and hand-washing.

Vaccines are truly a marvel of modern medicine and have eradicated illness that once plagued our world with death and disability. Polio and smallpox have been virtually eradicated by these amazing marvels of science and with your help we can try to add influenza to the list. It is my hope, and the hope of many, that a vaccine for COVID-19 will be

available in the coming year. With your help and commitment to do your part by getting your flu shot, we will be closer to ending this pandemic and making it safely through another flu season.

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This week's Health Talk was written by Rick Hildebrant, MD, MBA, Chief Medical Information Officer and Medical Director Hospital Medicine at Rutland Regional Medical Center.