

Winter Health Forecast:

Protect Yourself Against Influenza & Other Winter Infections

by Darlene Johnson, Community Health Manager

Brookline Public Health & Human Services

We are approaching the height of winter, and it is crucial that older adults protect their health against common respiratory illnesses, such as influenza, COVID-19, and RSV. As our bodies age, our immune system's response weakens, making it especially important to stay up to date on vaccines. While vaccines prevent some illnesses, others, like norovirus, are prevented through common practices that reduce infections and the spread of contagion.

Influenza

Influenza is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses, most commonly influenza A and B. It infects the nose, throat, and, sometimes, the lungs, causing mild to severe illness.

Brookline Public Health & Human Services (PH&HS) recommends that adults 65 and older receive the high-dose (or adjuvanted) flu vaccine to prevent severe symptoms and other complications that can lead to hospitalization or death. While September and October are the best times to get vaccinated against the flu, there is still time to get vaccinated. Having some protection is better than none. Everyone 6 months and older is advised to receive an annual flu vaccine before the peak flu season, which runs from November to March. The body will build full immunity within 2 weeks of being vaccinated.

The 2025-26 flu vaccine includes H1N1, H3N2, and influenza B. This season, a new strain, sublineage K H3N2, is circulating in the United States and globally. The strain emerged too late to be included in this year's flu vaccine, but the current vaccine still offers protection against serious symptoms or complications that could lead to a hospital visit or worse. The vaccine is also expected to be a good match for H1N1 and influenza B strains. Additionally, PH&HS tracks community risk levels using the [MA-DPH Respiratory Illness Reporting](#).

Flu symptoms look similar to those of COVID-19 and other viruses. It is important to test to determine the virus type and the best treatment options. Several brands offer combination at-home antigen test kits for COVID-19, influenza A, and influenza B. Self-test kits are available at local pharmacies, and some health insurance plans cover the cost. Check with your insurance provider to find out if you are eligible for coverage. The department no longer provides test kits and will notify the Council on Aging if the program is renewed.

If you test positive for the flu, check with your physician to see if you should be prescribed antivirals to reduce symptom severity. Antivirals are most effective when they are started within 24 to 48 hours of symptom onset.

COVID-19

Coronavirus, also known as coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), is a highly contagious virus that attacks the lungs and respiratory system, but can affect other parts of the body. Most COVID-19 symptoms are similar to those caused by the flu; additional symptoms include shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, and new loss of smell or taste. Some individuals experience mild symptoms, while others may progress to more severe symptoms. Symptom onset occurs within 2 – 14 days after exposure to the virus.

The department recommends that adults aged 65 and older receive the COVID-19 vaccination when an updated formula becomes available. The latest vaccine usually becomes available in the fall. Staying up to date with the current vaccine will provide protection against emerging variants. Older adults, people who are immunocompromised, or those who have underlying health conditions, are at greater risk of becoming ill. Similar to the flu vaccine, the COVID-19 vaccine will reduce severity and risk of hospitalization. PH&HS monitors the [MA-DPH COVID-19 Reporting](#) to determine the risk level in Brookline.

If you test positive for COVID-19, depending on the stage of your illness, you can be prescribed antivirals like Paxlovid to shorten your recovery time.

RSV

Respiratory syncytial Virus infection (RSV) is a respiratory virus that affects the nose, throat, and lungs. Cold-like symptoms develop in stages within 4 to 6 days of an infection. Although RSV infections resolve on their own, the virus can cause serious complications in older adults with certain risk factors, including chronic heart or lung disease or weakened immune systems. If the symptoms become more severe, they could lead to hospitalization, especially in people over 75.

The RSV vaccine is recommended for people 75 and older or 50 – 74-year-olds who are at high risk of contracting severe RSV. The vaccine is not annual; it comes in a one-time, single dose provides protection for at least 2 years. Late summer and early fall are the best times to get vaccinated. Consult your primary physician to determine whether you should receive an RSV shot.

On the front: The “Winter Vomiting Virus.”

Norovirus, commonly known as the winter vomiting virus or stomach flu, is unrelated to the flu but another common infection that afflicts people during the colder months. It spreads through contaminated food, water, surfaces, and exposure to people who are already infected.

The virus causes a sudden onset of gastrointestinal symptoms - diarrhea and vomiting - lasting for 1 to 3 days. Unlike the flu and COVID-19, there is no vaccine to protect people against this resilient, easily transmitted virus. Several companies, including the local pharmaceutical brand Moderna, are developing a norovirus vaccine and are at various stages of clinical trials. While an effective solution is close to being developed, it is important that people continue to practice proper hygiene to prevent this illness.

The best way to protect yourself from a storm of sickness is to keep the following tips in mind.

Stop a Sickness Storm in its Tracks

Illnesses are often spread through close contact with someone who is infected, or through frequently touched surfaces or shared items. Here are some ways you can protect yourself:

- Get vaccinated against the flu and COVID-19, especially if you are an older adult (65+) who is high-risk, immunocompromised, or has underlying conditions. Talk to your healthcare provider about additional recommended vaccines.
- Wash your hands frequently. Clean your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer when you are not able to wash your hands immediately.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes by using a tissue or your elbow to prevent the virus from spreading. Make sure you dispose of contaminated tissue and wash your hands immediately.
- Stay home when you are sick, for at least 24 hours after a fever resolves (without fever-reducing medicine). If you need to leave home, try to wear a mask when visiting high-traffic, indoor spaces.
- Clean high-touch surfaces in your home with soap and water, such as countertops, doorknobs, and handrails. To disinfect, mix 5 tablespoons of bleach with 1 gallon of water, and make sure your home is properly ventilated when cleaning with the solution.
- Improve air quality by opening windows for short periods to bring in fresh air, using an air purifier, or spending time outdoors.
- Add a humidifier to your home to improve your respiratory health. The added moisture in the air will help ease any congestion, throat and nasal dryness, and help people with asthma or COPD breathe easier.
- Eat a well-balanced diet, make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise each day, and get 7–9 hours of sleep each night. If you feel yourself becoming sick, make sure you allow your body rest and drink plenty of fluids, particularly water, and avoid caffeinated or alcoholic beverages.

- Make sure you have at-home COVID-19 and influenza A & B tests on hand to use if you begin feeling influenza-like symptoms.