

Twin Cities Pioneer Press - It's okay to get flu and COVID shots at the same time. 9 things to know

Have you gotten your flu shot yet? What about your COVID-19 booster?

Now is a good time to get both — and yes, health officials say, you can get both jabs at the same time.

It's [National Influenza Vaccination Week](#), a time when public health officials urge people to get vaccinated — and that's especially true during a pandemic.

“That is actually part of our ‘Band Together to Protect Each Other’ campaign — to let people know they can get their flu vaccine at the same time as a COVID-19 vaccine dose,” says Andrea Ahneman, a spokesperson with the Minnesota Department of Public Health. “It’s important to be protected against both diseases to help protect yourself and others, so being able to get both shots at the same time can make it even more convenient for people.”

Here are nine things the Minnesota Department of Health wants you to know about influenza in general and this flu season in particular:

PHARMACIES ARE BUSY PLACES THESE DAYS

With so many people already heading to their clinics or pharmacies to get their COVID-19 boosters, “it’s an ideal time to get your flu shot,” says Jennifer Heath, supervisor in the Vaccine Preventable Disease Section of the state health department.

That includes kids.

“Anyone eligible for a COVID shot can get other vaccines at the same time, including their flu vaccine,” Ahneman says.

Since pharmacies are busy right now, be persistent if you can’t just walk into your usual location without an appointment.

“For walk-in pharmacies, it will be highly variable,” Heath says of the demand. “We are well aware it’s more challenging in the metro. We definitely encourage people to call ahead and use the Flu Vaccine Finder website.

“Even if you don’t get the flu vaccine until after the holidays, it’s still a good time, as we can have flu activity into March and April.”

Find a vaccine location near you at [Vaccines.gov/find-vaccines](https://www.vaccines.gov/find-vaccines). Also, the Minnesota Department of Health’s influenza page includes information on low and no-cost vaccine programs and clinics. Go to [Health.state.mn.us/diseases/flu](https://health.state.mn.us/diseases/flu).

INFLUENZA HAS ARRIVED IN MINNESOTA

“We have started to see flu activity,” says Heath. “It has started nationally, and it has even started in Minnesota. Right now, we are seeing the ‘H3’ strain (Influenza A). While that might not mean a lot to people, the H3 strain tends to be a little more severe and hits young children and the elderly the hardest.”

FLU IS CURRENTLY AFFECTING YOUNGER PEOPLE

While it’s too early to make sweeping statements about this year’s influenza, there is some initial data: “Nationally and in Minnesota, there are cases coming up in children and [young adults](#),” says Heath. “We don’t know why that is. It can change, but we want the public to be aware.”

Here’s one reason why that initial data is a concern:

“We also see that young adults don’t get the flu vaccine,” Heath says. “But it’s definitely not too late.”

FLU VACCINATION NUMBERS ARE TOO LOW

How many Minnesotans have gotten the flu shot so far this year?

Not enough.

“We looked at the data pretty recently,” Heath said. “It’s 1.9 million flu vaccine doses administered to Minnesotans, and what is concerning to us is this is lower than this time last year, when it was 2.3 million flu vaccine doses. What we really want the public to understand is that we still have this window of time. It’s important to still get your flu vaccine.”

GET A FLU SHOT, CONSERVE HEALTH CARE RESOURCES

Last year, flu numbers were down — way down — as many students were learning from home and mask mandates were in effect. This year, kids are back in school, masks are more of a suggestion in many places and Minnesota is in the midst of another pandemic surge.

That’s why health officials are urging the public to [“Band Together to Protect Each Other”](#) in its public awareness campaign — a campaign that encourages Minnesotans to get vaccinated for both influenza and COVID-19.

“In a typical flu year, we do tend to see hospital admissions go up in conjunction with flu disease,” says Heath. “Our health system is already at maximum capacity with COVID. It’s really important that people protect themselves from COVID and influenza, and so there’s care available for other things that they might need to be hospitalized for, from surgeries to accidents.”

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE INFLUENZA

“One of the biggest myths about influenza, one that is so persistent, is that influenza isn’t serious,” says Heath. “Lots of times, it’s not. But it can be very serious. And every single year we unfortunately see healthy people get influenza and die. I think it’s a point people need to be aware of. Flu isn’t something to brush off.

“Even if it’s not a serious case, it can still keep you out of school, work and daily life for five to seven days — and I think now, in the age of COVID, people understand how negatively that can impact you.”

NO, THE FLU SHOT DOESN’T MAKE YOU ‘SICK’

Some people avoid the flu shot because they dislike potential side effects. That attitude might have evolved now, somewhat. “More people understand how vaccines work in general, thanks to the COVID vaccine,” Heath says.

That is, muscle aches or even a slight fever might be a sign of our immune system powering up in response to the shot, as it’s supposed to do.

“It can be inconvenient,” she says, “but it’s nothing compared to influenza.”

BABIES NEED YOUR HELP

Did you know that infants need to be six months of age before they can get vaccinated for influenza? By getting vaccinated, you are protecting the youngest and the most vulnerable in our community. It’s called cocooning, or the Cocoon Strategy, and it’s especially important for those in direct contact with the baby.

“Everyone in the family should get vaccinated,” Heath said.

Pregnant women should also get the flu shot, the health department says.

STAY HOME IF YOU FEEL SICK

Finally, while everyone knows it’s important to stay home if you are sick, the health department is reminding Minnesota that this is a crucial step when the flu season is ramping up during a COVID surge.

“Staying home when you are sick is one of the best ways to prevent spreading flu or COVID or any respiratory illness,” Heath says.

Also, if you have any upper respiratory symptoms, health officials still recommend getting a COVID-19 test. Your healthcare provider will determine if you also need an influenza test (and a Tamiflu prescription).