

## Flu, COVID-19 And RSV Vaccinations: What MN Residents Need To Know

The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a flu vaccination and an updated COVID-19 shot.

For the first time, Minnesota residents have a trio of vaccines available to fight respiratory viruses that cause misery in the fall and winter months, but health officials worry that “shot fatigue” may leave many people unprotected against serious illnesses.

The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a flu vaccination and an updated COVID-19 shot. Vaccines for RSV, or Respiratory Syncytial Virus, are available for the first time.

“We need to use them,” Dr. Mandy Cohen, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said at a news briefing Thursday, in which they released a survey that shows fewer than half of Americans plan to get any kind of vaccine. “Right now is the right time.”

### **What’s Happening In Minnesota?**

The latest CDC surveillance [data](#) for Minnesota shows 2.5 percent of emergency room visits for the week ending Sept. 23 were for respiratory illnesses.

Specifically, 0.1 percent of all visits were for the flu, 0 percent were for RSV and 2.3 percent were for COVID-19.

The newly updated COVID-19 vaccine protects against new versions of the constantly evolving coronavirus, which has caused a late-summer jump in infections, hospitalizations and deaths. So far, health officials have said, the vaccine appears to be a good match against currently circulating variants.

### **Nationwide, Vaccinations Trending Down**

Last year, just 47 percent of U.S. adults received the flu vaccine during the 2022-23 respiratory illness season, down from 49 percent in the year prior. This year, vaccine hesitancy could be greater, according to a National Foundation for Infectious Diseases survey that showed only about 1 in 5 Americans are worried they’ll get seriously ill with any of the three respiratory illnesses.

About 43 percent of U.S. adults said they don’t plan to or are unsure about whether they’ll get a flu shot. Only 40 percent said they plan to get a COVID booster, and among adults 60 and older for whom the RSV shot is recommended, only 40 percent said they plan to get it.

When asked the reasons for their vaccine hesitancy, respondents cited concerns about side effects, distrust of vaccines in general and doubts about their efficacy.

Health officials don't think this year's respiratory virus season will be as serious as last year, when [hospitals, especially pediatric units, were overwhelmed](#) with flu, RSV and COVID cases. The flu season arrived early last year, with early-season cases at the highest [level](#) in more than a decade.

### **Free Covid-19 Vaccines Are Available**

About 2 million Americans got the new COVID-19 shot in the first two weeks the updated vaccine was available, despite a messy rollout and some early insurance barriers. For the first time, the federal government isn't buying and distributing the shots.

Pharmacies, physician practices and other health care providers have had to order their own vaccine supplies. The shots are supposed to be provided free in-network to the insured, but it has taken some time for insurers to update their billing codes, meaning some people have had to pay out-of-pocket costs.

There's a remedy. The CDC's [Bridge Access Program](#) offers COVID-19 vaccines at no cost for adults 18 years and older without health insurance and for adults whose health insurance does not provide zero-cost coverage for COVID-19 vaccines. COVID-19 vaccines through this program are available at select local healthcare providers, local health centers, and pharmacies. If you are uninsured, you can [find free COVID-19 testing](#) and [free COVID-19 treatment](#) that can reduce the risk of hospitalization and death.

### **How To Find COVID Shots For Kids**

It's still a little easier to find the updated COVID-19 vaccines for adults than for children, but the kid shots have started shipping, health officials said late last week.

Vaccines for adults were shipped first, and the doses for children under 12 have been shipping in recent days.

Drugstore chain CVS said its doses for ages 5 and older began arriving last week, although supplies vary by location, while its MinuteClinic locations anticipate opening appointments for tots as young as 18 months in the coming days.

As for pediatricians, they've had to guess how many doses to buy up-front while waiting to learn how much insurance companies would reimburse them for each shot, Dr. Jesse Hackell of the American Academy of Pediatrics told The Associated Press.

He said early parent demand is heartening, but that pediatricians expect to spend lots of time this fall explaining to hesitant families how important COVID-19 vaccination is even for healthy children.

### **What About Flu Vaccine?**

Fewer Americans got a flu vaccine last year than before the coronavirus pandemic -- a discouraging gap that CDC hopes to reverse.

People should get a flu shot every fall because influenza also mutates every year. Like with COVID-19, flu is most dangerous to older adults, the very young and people with weak immune systems, lung, heart or other chronic health problems, or who are pregnant.

There are multiple kinds of flu vaccines, including a nasal spray version for certain younger people. More important, three kinds are specifically recommended for seniors because they do a better job revving up an older adult's immune system.

### **A Dose In Each Arm**

COVID-19 and flu vaccines can be administered the same day, although health officials say it might be more comfortable to get a shot in each arm rather than getting both in the same arm.

### **Who Needs The New RSV Vaccine?**

RSV is a cold-like nuisance for most people, and not as well-known as the flu. But RSV packs hospitals every winter and kills several hundred tots and thousands of seniors. The CDC says that already this year, RSV cases are rising in the Southeast.

RSV vaccines from GSK and Pfizer are approved for adults 60 and older.

Drugstores have adequate supplies, but some seniors are reporting hurdles such as requirements to get a prescription. That's because the CDC recommended that seniors talk with their doctors about the new vaccine.

### **What About Babies And RSV?**

The FDA also has approved Pfizer's RSV vaccine to be given late in pregnancy so moms-to-be pass virus-fighting antibodies to their fetuses, offering some protection at birth. The CDC recommended that pregnancy vaccinations be offered between September and January, when RSV tends to be most common.

There's no vaccine for children, but babies whose mothers didn't get vaccinated in pregnancy may get an injection of lab-made antibodies to guard against RSV. Called Beyfortus, the one-dose shot from Sanofi and AstraZeneca is different from a vaccine, which teaches the body to make its own infection-fighting antibodies, but is similarly protective. It should be available in October.