

# Get patients vaccinated to help avoid double whammy flu season

SEP 11, 2020

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At a time when the health care system is already stressed from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Health and Human Services Department (HHS) is urging parents to “catch up to get ahead” with their children’s immunizations.

Meanwhile, in *JAMA*, experts are stressing the urgent need for adults to get their influenza vaccination and noting that communities that have been hit hard by COVID-19 are typically the same as those where severe flu outbreaks are likely to occur.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has led to worrisome declines in well-child visits and routine immunization rates,” wrote HHS Assistant Secretary for Health Brett P. Giroir, MD, in a blog post on the HHS website.

“Although we have made progress to reverse this trend, without high vaccination rates there is a risk for outbreaks and further strain on our nation’s health care system,” added Dr. Giroir, who is also an admiral in the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service. “It is tragic to see a child become sick, or even die, from a disease that we can prevent with safe and effective vaccines.”

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report examining childhood immunization rates in Michigan found a sharp decline during the pandemic—except for birth-dose hepatitis B coverage, which are usually given in the hospital.

For May 2020, immunization rates for recommended vaccines for 5-month-old children fell to 49.7% from 67.9% in May 2019. Declines were also seen in other age cohorts of children through 19 months old.

## Steps for your practice to take

HHS posted a video of U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams, MD, telling parents that, if their child has missed a vaccination appointment, now is the time to reschedule it.

“Getting your child caught up on recommended vaccines is the best way to ensure they stay healthy during this challenging time,” Dr. Adams says in the video. “Without vaccines, your child is at risk for getting sick from serious—and entirely preventable—diseases.”

CDC strategies to maintain immunization services include:

- Dedicating specific clinics, rooms or buildings for sick visits and well visits.
- Reducing the number of patients on site at any one time.
- Closing waiting rooms or registration areas.
- Having patients check in by phone and receive vaccinations from their vehicles in the parking lot.

The HHS also has a physician toolkit for vaccine promotion that includes images and messages that practices can use on their social media accounts.

Learn more about why the push is on to vaccinate 65% of Americans against the flu.

## Concurrent epidemics put adults at risk

The issue of vaccinations is not just for children. Recent columns in *JAMA* have highlighted that the need for adults to receive flu vaccinations is more urgent than ever.

Estimates for influenza deaths have ranged from 12,000 to 61,000 each year since 2010 and “a looming threat of concurrent influenza and COVID-19 epidemics is a major concern for public health officials and clinicians,” a trio of infectious disease specialists from Brigham and Women’s Hospital wrote in a *JAMA* Insights Clinical Update column.

They noted that mandated use of face coverings and closures of schools and stores could lower the incidence of flu and COVID-19. But, as restrictions relax, transmission of the deadly respiratory illnesses may grow.

CDC researchers issued a similar warning.

“Even a moderately severe influenza season in the presence of circulating SARS-CoV-2 would significantly amplify cases of acute respiratory illness, and more intensely stress health care personnel and resources, including hospitals, emergency departments, outpatient departments, and physicians’ offices,” they wrote in a recent *JAMA* Viewpoint column.

While flu vaccination rates hover around 45% for the general adult population, they noted, rates are substantially lower for Black, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaskan Native adults and that these are the same groups disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

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