

HEALTH INFORMATION ALERT

As we learn to live with COVID-19 while still fighting against it, our communities are facing new realities that impact individual risk assessment and lifestyle choices.

The first reality is that we no longer live in a time with aggressive mandates to control the spread. It's on each of us as individuals to determine our risk for exposure and decide when and if we need to protect ourselves, our families, and our co-workers (particularly those who are vulnerable).

Local health departments have always stressed informed consent – understanding your risk, having the latest, most trusted information at hand, and making your decisions accordingly.

With that in mind, we want our communities to know the following so each person can take responsibility for their actions and decisions:

Respiratory illnesses are likely to be more prevalent this year than last year.

Why? Because last year we were required by the state to wear masks indoors at all times, to practice social distancing, and to avoid indoor gatherings. Those requirements are no longer in place as we head into cold and flu season. We are beginning to move more activities indoors to escape the colder temperatures and are bound to see an increase in respiratory diseases – colds, flu, pneumonia, and COVID-19 -- some of which will result in hospitalization.

Hospital capacity is being closely monitored. This is NOT the same old message about flattening the curve. This is about hospital staffing. Like health systems across the nation, our region's health systems are facing staff shortages, particularly nurses. This can and does result in hospitals closing units to ensure they are providing safe care. These staffing and capacity decisions are fluid and change frequently. You can rest assured that your local hospitals DO have solid plans in place when and if diseases like COVID-19 surge. But, we all need to be informed on how current staffing issues can impact hospital bed availability on a day-to-day basis.

Any increases in COVID-19 cases, along with other respiratory diseases, will put a greater strain on hospitals as they deal with adequate staffing issues. Currently, COVID-19 cases represent about 10% of hospital occupancy in this region. Yet, our hospitals are more than 90% full.

What Can You Do?

We ask residents to focus on staying healthy this cold/flu season! While there's plenty that divides us in the fight against COVID-19, can we all agree on this:

- Wash your hands.
- Cover your cough.
- Keep your distance.

- Stay home and away from others when you don't feel well.

We also strongly encourage residents to get vaccinated for both flu and COVID-19. Both vaccines can safely be taken in the same day whether through a health department, pharmacy, urgent care center, neighborhood clinic, or healthcare provider.

As you weigh your decisions to shop, dine and gather, be smart about maintaining distance from others and consider masking indoors – especially if you are unvaccinated and if you have vulnerable family members or co-workers. Consider this not because someone is saying you must, but because these are two strategies, in addition to the ones mentioned above, that – when layered – can reduce your risk of getting sick.

Let's work harder than ever to keep one another healthy and out of the hospital this fall and winter. Thank you for your efforts to live with and fight against COVID-19.

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