Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Transcript: CDC Media Telebriefing – Update on Respiratory Disease Circulation

Press Briefing Transcript

Monday, December 5, 2022

- Audio recording [MP3 – 5 MB]

Please Note: This transcript is not edited and may contain errors.

00:00

Welcome and thank you for standing by participants are in a listen only mode until the question and answer session of today's event. At that time, you may press star one on your touch tone phone if you care to ask a question. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may please disconnect at this time. And I would like to turn it over to your host, Mr. Ben Haynes from the CDC. Answer You may begin. Thank you, Fran. And thank you all for joining us today to discuss respiratory disease circulation and kickoff. The National influenza vaccines Vaccination Week we're joined by Dr. by CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, and Board Chair of the American Medical Association, Dr. Sandra Fryhofer following their opening remarks, we will open up the lines to take your questions. I will now turn the call over to Dr. Walensky.

00:49

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us to discuss the need to increase vaccine uptake both flu and COVID during National Influenza Vaccination Week, and the high amount of multiple respiratory illnesses that we are seeing in the United States right now. Before I dive into the data with you, I just want to take a moment to recognize our healthcare and public health workers. The past several years have certainly not been easy, and we now face yet another surge of illness. Another moment of overstretched capacity and really one of tragic and often preventable sadness. I speak for many when I say we could not be more thankful for the work you continue to do to do every single day to save lives.

01:32

As we are all aware, nationally, we are seeing elevated levels of respiratory viruses including RSV, flu and COVID-19. Especially for RSV and flu, these levels are higher than we generally see this time of year. Levels of flu like illness, which includes people going to the doctor with a fever and a cough or sore throat are at either high or very high levels in 47 jurisdictions and that is up from 36 jurisdictions just last week. CDC estimates that since October 1, there have already been at least 8.7 million illnesses, 78,000 hospitalizations and 4500 deaths from flu. Flu hospital admissions reported through HHS's hospital surveillance system, which were already high for this time of year have nearly doubled during the last reporting period. Compared to the week prior hospitalizations for flu continue to be the highest we have seen at this time of year in a decade, demonstrating the significantly earlier flu season we are experiencing.

02:41

In addition, last week, we tragically reported two more flu deaths in children. A heartbreaking total of 14 pediatric deaths have already been reported so far just this season. So I want to emphasize that flu vaccines can be life saving and importantly, there is still time to get vaccinated to be protected against flu this season. And it's potentially serious consequences. Getting vaccinated is especially important for those at higher risk of severe flu illness, including those who are younger than five years old. Those who are older than 65 pregnant people and people who have certain underlying health conditions that put them at higher risk for severe and serious consequences. These also include groups experiencing the highest rates of hospitalization right now. concern only for some of these higher risk groups like children, adults over 65 and pregnant people. We are seeing lower rates of vaccination compared to this time last year. CDC also continues to closely track COVID-19 activity. In the past week, we've started to see the unfortunate and expected rise of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations nationally after the Thanksgiving holiday. This rise in cases and hospitalizations is especially worrisome as we move into the winter months when more people are assembling indoors with less ventilation. And as we approach the holiday season where many are gathering with loved ones across multiple generations. Additionally, RSP continues to remain high nationally with variations and activity levels regionally. We have seen signs that RSV may have peaked in some areas like the south and southeast and may be leveling off in the mid atlantic New England and Midwest. And while this is encouraging respiratory viruses continue to spread at high levels nationwide. And even in areas where RSV may be decreasing. Our hospital systems continue to be stressed with high numbers of patients with other respiratory illnesses. So as people look to protect themselves in their families, I want to leave you with three important steps we can all take to reduce the burden of respiratory illnesses. First and foremost, get vaccinated for two of the three viruses discussed today. There are vaccines updated

05:00

COVID-19 bivalient vaccines and flu vaccines are safe, they're effective and they can lower the risk of infection in general, and especially lower the risk of severe illness and death, mostly updated COVID-19 vaccines and this year's flu vaccines were formulated to protect against the viruses that are currently circulating right now. And recent data from CDC show updated COVID-19 vaccines help protect against COVID-19 illness, and COVID-19 associated deaths. Early surveillance shows that people who received their updated COVID-19 vaccine this year were nearly 15 times less likely to die from COVID-19 compared to people who are not vaccinated, and were also less likely to die from those than those who were vaccinated but had not received an updated COVID-19 vaccine. Importantly, we know that if you've received your primary series only your primary COVID vaccine series only you are considered fully vaccinated but you are not considered fully protected. To be best protected against severe disease this winter, you should get an updated vaccine as soon as you can, so that you are up to date with your COVID-19 series this winter. Second, take your everyday preventive actions such as covering your coughs and sneezes, staying away from people who are sick and staying home if you yourself are sick, washing your hands and improving ventilation in your home and workplaces. We also encourage you to wear a high quality, well-fitting mask to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses, most especially for those in the 5% of the population currently living in counties with high COVID-19 community level. CDC continues to recommend masking for anyone choosing to travel by plane, train, bus or other form of public transportation, or for anyone who may be immunocompromised or increased risk of severe disease. Third, and finally, if you do get sick present to your provider for early care, there are prescription antivirals to treat both flu and COVID-19. And these treatments are especially important for people who are at higher risk of complications from respiratory disease. Talk to your health care provider as soon as you have symptoms, so that these treatments can be started within the first few days of illness when they are most effective. So, as we approach the holiday season, togetherness, family, community and connection are truly now more important than ever to achieve all of those things in good health. It's critical. We all take the steps to protect both our ourselves and our loved ones. With that I'm grateful to have Dr. Fryhofer with me and we'll turn things over to her. Thank you.

07:40

Thank you so much, Dr. Walensky. I'm Dr. Sandra Fryhofer, board chair at the American Medical Association. I'm also an internal medicine physician in Atlanta. I see patients in my office every day and I can tell you firsthand, this year's flu season is off to a rough start. Flu is here. It started early. And with COVID and RSV also circulating it's a perfect storm for a terrible holiday season. Over the last few years COVID protective measures also prevented spread of flu and other

respiratory infections, but we're really no longer in that bubble. And that's why it's so important to get vaccinated for both flu and COVID. And you can get both vaccines at the same time. I know everyone's tired of getting shots. We all have booster fatigue. But understand. You could get really, really sick this year and ruin your holiday celebrations if you don't get vaccinated. On a good note, this year's flu vaccine formulation seems to be a good match to circulating viruses. It takes two weeks to build up protected antibodies, which is another reason to go ahead and get vaccinated now, this year all flu vaccinations are quadrivalent meaning they cover four strains of flu – two flu A's and two flu B's. And different flu strains can circulate within the same flu season. Right now, we're seeing outbreaks of influenza type A and the only thing worse than getting flu once in a season is getting it again and you can so even if you've already had flu this season, you should still get vaccinated once you recover from the acute illness to keep you from getting it again with a different flu strain. Everyone six months and older needs flu vaccinations every year. Those at highest risk for severe flu complications include the very young, the very old people with chronic medical conditions and also pregnant people. And this year for the very first time, three specific vaccine products are now preferred for those aged 65 and older. These include two higher dose formulations BlueZone high dose and the recombinant flu vaccine flu block and also the adjuvant ID flu vaccine flu add the adjuvants added to improve immune response. But if one of those is not available, don't wait. It's better to get any flu shot, than no flu shot at all. Now, vaccines are not 100%. And that said, if you do get sick, even if you've been vaccinated call your physician, you may need an antiviral, go ahead and do a home test for COVID. You also will probably need to get tested for flu. There are specific antivirals for flu and specific antivirals for COVID. But flu antivirals don't work for COVID and vice versa. And the only way to know for sure what you have is to get tested. It is going to be a confusing respiratory infection season. figuring out what's making people sick is going to be a conundrum. So your best bet to stay well during the holidays is to get vaccinated for flu. And also make sure you're up to date on COVID vaccination, which means getting that Omicron bivalient booster when you're eligible. And please stay home when you're sick. Share your love by not sharing your sickness this holiday season, please get vaccinated. It's the best way to protect yourself. It's the best way to protect your loved one's loved ones, and it's the best way to protect your community.

10:00

Thank you Dr. Walensky and Dr. Fryhofer. Fran, we are ready to take questions.

11:18

Thank you very much. If you would like to ask a question, please press star one. Please unmute your phone and record your name clearly when prompted, Your name is required to introduce your question. Our first is from Adriana Rodriguez with USA Today your line is open.

11:35

Hi, thank you so much for doing this and for taking my question. Outside of sort of the world of respiratory viruses. I'm looking at the UK their health agency had reported an uptick in strep a infections compared to pre pandemic years, and also reported six pediatric deaths. I was wondering if strep a was a concern here in the U.S. as well? Are we doing any sort of real time surveillance on these inspections? And if so, what does that say?

12:12

This is Dr. Walensky. Maybe I will start and then pass it over to the subject matter experts on my team and just say we have seen some outbreaks of streptococcal disease as well. Those tend to be more localized, but maybe defer to my team to see if they have anything more to add.

12:33

This is Barbara Mahon. We do have surveillance ongoing for invasive group A strep infections are the most severe infections that are found in the bloodstream or not just in the throat. And as far as I'm aware, we have not heard of an any notable increase. But we can check on that and confirm that with you.

13:02

Great, thank you.

13:03

Next question, please. Karen Lambman with Fox.

13:10

Hi there. Thanks for taking my question for having this conference. I we're hearing a lot about disproportionately elevated pediatric hospitalizations. Due to RSV and flu. I'm just wondering how adult hospitalizations compare these if you have any data or context that you can share, to help people understand just how out of proportion. The adult burden of severe disease due to respiratory illness has also been this year.

13:34

I'm sure I will say over the last week we've since seen a rise in hospitalization from COVID-19, up about 15%, 15 to 20% week over week. So that's the first step that we've seen related to COVID-19. Generally, when we see these increases, and as you know, increased rates of severe disease, for COVID-19, as well as for RSV and influenza in those over the age of 65. And much of those increased hospitalizations are related to those in the older age demographic and those with comorbidities. So, I would say even more reason to emphasize vaccination in those more vulnerable groups.

14:22

Next question, please. Emanuel John Milton with Bloomberg News.

14:28

Thanks for taking my call. So vaccination rates of black and Hispanic children appear to have improved from last year but vaccination rates for white children are dropped from last year and are down 7% from pre pandemic levels. So why are these? Why is the drop happening and how's that being addressed by the CDC?

14:50

(Dr. Walensky) Maybe I'll start and can defer to my team as well and say we have made a lot of intentional efforts not just in in COVID-19 vaccine, but in influenza and COVID 19 vaccine to bridge the demographic divide where we have seen it in vaccination rates across this country and again specifically in COVID. We have seen those not just in race and ethnicity but also in in regional and rural versus urban. And we've spent a lot of time and energy on that work. I think Dr. Fryhofer commented that there is now vaccine fatigue. And we have seen under vaccination in many diseases, not just an

influenza and COVID 19, but also a drop in pediatric vaccinations as a whole. We've reported that from the CDC, we have intensive efforts working with communities working with the AMA, as we are here today working with the AMA and many other organizations, community-based organizations, trusted messengers and outreach to try and try and bridge many of the areas where we have low vaccination rates. I can defer to my team to see if they have more to add. But this is a lot of the hard work that we have ahead. And we actually also look to the media to help us share the stories of the challenges that happen when vaccinations are not administered.

16:15

(Dr. Fryhofer) This is Dr. Fryhofer. I wanted to also add that over the last two years with the COVID protective measures, you know, wearing masks washing our hands, staying isolated, we really had just almost non existent flu seasons. And so I think there was a there's probably like a sense of complacency. We think we've forgotten how bad flu can be. But this year season is a shout out that it can get really bad and it's here so people need to get vaccinated.

16:47

Next question, please. Spencer Kimball with CNBC.

16:53

Hi, thanks so much for doing the call. You mentioned that the children, the elderly, flu vaccination uptake is lower compared to last year. How much lower? I see the children's data on the website. But I'm curious in particular about the elderly. And then the CDC have any data on vaccine efficacy yet? And finally, what are you anticipating for hospitalizations moving forward, given that we're coming out of Thanksgiving and heading into Christmas? Thank you.

17:25

(Dr. Walensky) Thanks, Spencer. So in terms of pregnant women, we've seen lower vaccination coverage. Again, some of this is really just commercial, public private payers, so not all of it is coming into us uniformly. But we've seen lower coverage from pregnant women of about 12% lower than last season, children we're seeing lower rates are about 5% lower than pre pandemic in terms of where we were at the same time last season. And just to be clear, people are continuing to get their flu shot. And it is really important that you do continue to get your flu shot because getting it now it's certainly better than not getting it at all. And I can give you the numbers for where we are compared to those over the age of 65. We, of course look in real time as to how well we think the flu the influenza match is to what's circulating right now the good news is that looks like it is a very good match. We have more definitive data later in the season, of course in the spring as to how we did. But I also want to emphasize even an imperfect matching season, we see 35% decreased rates of hospitalization, even when we don't have a good match which really just emphasizes when we do have a good match how much more effective it will be. And of course so much of what we can anticipate in the season ahead. We do know so far that we have seen an early season both for influenza as well as for RSV. We do know that if we do a lot of the work now and people roll up their sleeves to get vaccinated, there is a lot that we can do to prevent severe disease. What we don't know is what will happen in the weeks ahead. Thank you.

(Dr. Fryhofer) This is Dr. Fryhofer, also want to point out how important it is for pregnant women to get vaccinated. Mom getting her flu shot protects baby during those first few months of life when the baby's too young to be vaccinated because we can't vaccinate against flu until you're six months old. So, just so important for particularly for pregnant women to go ahead and get vaccinated.

(Dr. Walensky) Yeah, thank you. That's an essential point. If you're not doing it for you do it for baby.

19:41

Next question.

19:43

I'm sorry, this is Barbara Mahon. I just want to add the same goes for COVID that pregnant women being vaccinated protects their babies for the first six months against hospitalization for COVID. And both of these vaccines are safe for pregnant women.

20:03

All right, next is from Mike Stobbe. With the Associated Press.

20:08

Hi, thank you for taking my call. And thanks for doing this. It's really a question I was gonna ask guys, it's been asked, but I should ask you there's news out this morning that Pfizer is asking the FDA to authorize COVID You know, the the bivalent booster shot to be used as the third dose for kids five and under. I don't think there's been any announcement about Moderna. Do you have any information about? Are we going to see consideration or decision making from the federal government on bivalent shot for kids? Younger than five on Moderna? And also, what's your anticipation of uptake of the Bible and booster the uptake has been pretty low in that age group? Could you tell us why and what your anticipation of uptake is going to be?

21:07

(Dr. Walensky) Mike, I'll maybe I'll start with that and say, obviously, I'm going to have to defer some of those questions to the FDA. But what I will say is to maybe go back to the second point that you're making, which is, we have demonstrated through probably the most extensive vaccine safety system in this country's history, the overwhelming safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines. Right now, I think one of the most important things that we can do is, especially as pediatric hospitals and parents are overwhelmed with this respiratory virus season is get children vaccinated for influenza. And for COVID, I will just give some statistics of that, you know, less than 5% of children, between the ages of two and four years old, are have completed their primary series. So I think that really this is a call to say, we need to keep those kids well, we need to keep them out of the hospital, the best way to do that is through vaccination with a primary series with a booster as well as with influenza.

22:19

Next question, please.

22:21

Fenit Nirappil with Washington Post.

22:25

Thanks for taking time. You mentioned earlier how if you're in a high community level COVID-19 community level jurisdiction, you should consider masking. I'm wondering is it time to revisit the community levels which are focused on COVID And to make it more holistically look at respiratory viruses overall, like if you're in a community without much COVID-19 and hospitals, but there's a lot of RSD and flu isn't that reason to be wearing a mask?

22:56

(Dr. Walensky) Yeah, I appreciate that question. It's something that we are actively looking into at CDC. In the meantime, what I do want to say one need not take, wait for CDC action in order to put a mask on. So we do know that 5% of the population is living in places with a high COVID-19 community level – we do encourage people to mask. We know that 32% of jurisdictions, our populations have areas with medium COVID-19 community levels. And so we would encourage all of those safe, preventive measures – hand washing, staying home when you're sick, during masking, increased ventilation for during respiratory virus season, but especially in areas of high COVID-19 community levels. And we are exactly looking into the question you asked.

23:48

Next question.

23:50

Hilary Brueck with Insider.

23:54

Hi, thanks for taking my question. I wanted to ask, we've been hearing from some folks who are testing negative for various things, including, you know, some people who test negative for the flu and for COVID and for RSV and they're feeling frustrated that they're, you know, completely bulldozed by these respiratory effects infections that maybe they haven't had in a few years. What would you say to those folks?

24:21

(Dr. Walensky) Dr. Fryhofer, you want to start with that one, and then I've seen coming behind you.

(Dr. Fryhofer) Sure. I think the people that are testing negative for flu COVID and RSV, should be very glad but understand those aren't the only respiratory infections that are out there. People can still have regular colds, but all these things we've talked about masking, washing your hands, covering your cough, staying home if you're sick, all those things can keep down the spread of all these respiratory infections. And you know, it's it's that time of year.

24:54

(Dr. Walensky) Yeah, maybe I will just add, you know, that we've always known colds and flu season is more than just flu. Now we have, of course, flu and RSV that are on people's radars as well with COVID. But again, there are numerous other respiratory pathogens, viral pathogens that circulate this time of year. Turns out that the cold weather the gathering indoors, all of that is good for respiratory viruses and bad for symptoms. But what I would say is, you know, there are other pathogens out there, we want to make sure that we are on top of the ones that people can do something about that is prevention with vaccines, flu and COVID, for sure. And then intervention with antivirals, again, influenza and COVID. We want to make sure people know that they can do their injury prevention and treatment interventions for both of those.

25:48

Great, we have time for two more questions.

25:51

Sidney Spencer 11 Alive News Atlanta, WXIA.

25:56

Hi, thank you for taking my question. I wanted to ask, I know you mentioned there's been a rise in hospitalizations, particularly for children. So we've seen that there's been shortages of a lot of antibiotics and antivirals. So I was wondering, how's that has? How has that? How would that has been affecting hospitals abilities to treat these patients? And also, I know you mentioned that we might ask for antivirals from our healthcare providers. Can we always expect those to be available? If we do need to get those?

26:29

Yeah, maybe I'll start and say CDC is aware of the reports of some of the shortages for both antivirals as well as antibiotics across the country. I know FDA is working and manufacturers, and working with manufacturers, to try and explore what can be done to address this. I do also want to put in a plug at this point and some of those are outpatient antibiotics and outpatient antivirals, as well. And I think important now, to put in a plug for responsible antibiotic stewardship here. We do know that there's often an overuse of antibiotics, especially in the case where people are coming in with a viral sickness where the antibiotics won't be helpful in that case. So we are working to explore what can be done as is FDA, but importantly, we're asking physicians also to practice responsible antibiotic stewardship in this case. Thank you.

27:26

And our final question, Elaina Block with USA.

27:31

Hi, there. I wanted to ask regarding the 14 pediatric cases that ended in deaths, the influenza cases, what do we know about the demographics and about whether or not they were vaccinated for influenza? Thank you.

27:49

(Dr. Walensky) That's a good question. I don't have the details of that. I wonder if anyone on my team does and if not, we can get back with you to the extent that we received them at CDC.

28:01

(Lynnette Brammer) Yeah, this is one that I mean, in general. Right now. We don't have the information. On vaccination rates. Much of that information is still missing. But very consistently year to year, approximately 80% of the pediatric deaths are unvaccinated.

28:27

Thank you, Dr. Walensky and Dr. Fryhofer and thank you all for joining us today. If there are further questions, please contact the CDC media office at 404-639-3286 or you can email media@cdc.gov. Thank you.

28:46

Conference has now concluded again thank you for your participation please disconnect at this time.

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