

Fall Vaccinations: Flu, COVID, and RSV

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Two and a half years after the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Washington State, more than 70% of Snohomish County residents have completed their primary vaccination series, but a lot fewer are getting the new bivalent booster. Getting vaccinated and boosted now is the best way to keep yourself and others healthy in the face of this winter's predicted "triple-demic" of COVID-19, flu, and RSV.

Although it's early in the season, doctors are already seeing more flu and respiratory infections than usual. After a couple years of social isolation, peoples' immunity to common viruses has waned, and many children are being exposed for the first time.

“Coming into the holidays, as the weather gets colder and everybody moves inside congregating with family, it’s really important to get vaccinated so that we have an additional layer of protection,” said Dr. Stephanie Abbott, Director of Clinical Research at Western Washington Medical Group.

The Purpose of Vaccination

Vaccines build your body’s immune response to better fight off an infection. Vaccination reduces the likelihood of infection. And if you do get infected, it reduces the viral load so that the illness caused by infection will be much less severe.

“When you get vaccinated you have defenses. You have antibodies on board that are neutralizing that virus so that you don’t end up with super high viral loads. When you have no defenses you end up with high viral loads and you get really sick. That’s how we saw a lot of patients hospitalized, and in the ICU, and how a million people in the United States died from COVID-19,” said Abbott.

Side Effects of Vaccines

“Vaccines cannot cause disease,” said Abbott. While it’s not uncommon after vaccination to experience symptoms like fever and fatigue that resemble illness, “It’s your immune system building antibodies. Your body is doing work and that oftentimes is not a friendly experience.”

Since everyone’s immune system is different, individuals will respond differently to vaccination. Some people experience more severe side effects when they receive multiple vaccines at the same time – for example, a COVID-19 booster and a flu shot – while others won’t have any problem at all.

Side effects of vaccines can be unpredictable and variable. But the most common side effect is muscle soreness at the injection site.

Many people claim the side effects of COVID vaccination were worse than the symptoms of their breakthrough infection. Abbott says this is as it should be. “The antibodies you built from the vaccine made it easy for your body to fight the infection later.”

She also emphasized that the benefits of vaccination extend beyond yourself. Your infection might be asymptomatic or mild, but you might pass it on to someone more vulnerable who could die. “It’s not just about protecting yourself. It’s about protecting

everyone around you.”

COVID-19 Vaccine and Boosters

The first COVID-19 vaccine was developed using genetic information from the original strain of the COVID-19 virus. Depending on which manufacturer’s version of the vaccine you received, you needed either one or two injections to be considered “fully vaccinated.” Abbott said that anyone who has not yet received any vaccination for COVID-19 should still get the original series first.

Anyone who has already received a full series of the original monovalent vaccine should get a bivalent booster this winter, regardless of whether they received a booster last winter. Bivalent vaccines contain components from two strains of virus, providing additional protection against newer variants of the disease. The new bivalent booster has been approved for children and adults.

Because immunity fades over time and new variants are constantly evolving, even people who have already had COVID-19 should get vaccinated. “However, if you’ve just had it, don’t rush out to get vaccinated. Wait 90 days to make sure that you can fully leverage the natural immunity you got from the infection,” said Abbott.

Should you get the flu shot?

The severity of flu seasons was highly variable even before the pandemic. “The past couple years we’ve seen low instances of flu because everybody was masked and social distancing,” said Abbott. Now that larger gatherings are returning and fewer people are wearing masks, flu is expected to come back with a vengeance. “It’s really important to get the flu shot this year,” she said.

Like COVID-19, new strains of flu are constantly evolving. “People get hospitalized and die as a result of the flu. I absolutely recommend everyone get the flu shot every year. Having that protection on board to neutralize that virus is important,” said Abbott.

There is a flu vaccine for everyone. Each year a new quadrivalent vaccine is formulated to protect against the four flu strains expected to be most important. Different formulations provide the right dose for infants through the elderly; egg and preservative free formulas can protect people with relevant allergies; and there’s even a nasal spray version for certain populations.

An annual flu shot reduces the risk of infection; reduces the severity of illness when a person does become infected; and it reduces the chance of infecting someone else who may be more vulnerable to severe illness.

RSV in children is on the rise

Respiratory Syncytial Virus or RSV is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild cold-like symptoms. RSV is already a problem this year, especially for children.

More than 75% of pediatric hospital beds are currently occupied across the US, according to the data from HHS. Infants 6 months and younger are getting hospitalized with RSV at more than 7 times the rate seen before the Covid-19 pandemic. Flu hospitalizations are also at a decade high with children and elderly most at risk, according to the CDC.

WWMG is part of a network of researchers who will be testing a vaccine for RSV, but for now, avoiding infection through the now-familiar strategies of masking, hand-washing, and maintaining social distance is the best prevention strategy.

Flu and COVID-19 vaccines do not provide direct protection from RSV. But getting all the vaccinations that are available will reduce the risk of contracting multiple infections at the same time.

How to protect yourself and your family from getting sick

“The more defenses that you have, the more diseases you can prevent, the better off you’re going to be,” said Abbott. It’s not uncommon for people to test positive for multiple infections. “It would be terrible to have COVID-19 and RSV and the flu at the same time. But when your defenses are down, and the greater incidence in the community the likelihood of catching all three is greater. The more battles that you’re fighting on multiple fronts, the worse your chances of recovery.”

Getting sick in the winter used to be inevitable, or at least a matter of chance. Although the landscape of infectious disease might feel more complicated today, vaccinations provide more control than ever over our ability to stay healthy through cold and flu season. To schedule your COVID or flu vaccination at one of our 7 primary care locations, request an appointment today.