

Here's how to stay healthy as respiratory illnesses spread this holiday season

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The holidays are back to their pre-pandemic glories, with the airline industry already expecting record-breaking travel days. But your loved ones aren't the only ones coming to town this season: A team of highly-

contagious respiratory viruses may also visit, and they likely have no plans to leave anytime soon.

Unseasonably-early waves of the flu and RSV, or [respiratory syncytial virus](#), are hitting cities across the U.S. and filling pediatric hospitals with [sick children](#). While most older children and adults with healthy immune systems can fight such an infection with little issue, the viruses can still cause nasty symptoms, like cough, congestion, fever and body aches.

It may seem like avoiding the circulating ailments is impossible, but [public health experts](#) say there are ways to lessen the likelihood of getting sick. Here's what you need to know to protect your family and friends as you celebrate the holidays:

COVID-19 safety measures work for other viruses, too

Though mask mandates are largely lifted and social distancing is a relic of the past, the same [public health measures](#) used to stop the spread of COVID-19 can also prevent RSV and [flu infections](#), said Catherine Troisi, an infectious disease epidemiologist with UTHealth Houston School of Public Health.

"We know that masks work because we weren't seeing flu and RSV back at the beginning and middle of the pandemic when people were wearing masks," Troisi said.

Practicing good health hygiene, and teaching children how to do the same, is also a good idea. This includes washing your hands before eating and coughing and sneezing into your elbow or a tissue rather than your hands, said Dr. Lauro Romano, a hospitalist at Cook Children's in Fort Worth.

Symptoms of RSV, the flu, COVID-19 and the common cold often look the same. Doctors can run tests to determine which infection someone has, but, for most people, that knowledge won't change the course of treatment.

Regardless of what type of virus someone, staying home until symptoms subside is the best way to avoid spreading the illness to others.

Respiratory illnesses affect different people in different ways

Some groups are more susceptible to [severe illness](#) from RSV, the flu and COVID-19 than others. While RSV looks similar to a cold in most [older children](#) and adults, the virus can lead to hospitalization and even death in infants and the elderly.

About 96% of inpatient beds at [pediatric hospitals](#) in North Texas are full as of Thursday, said Steve Love, president and CEO of the Dallas-Fort Worth Hospital Council. Adult hospitals have also noted increases in flu patients.

For people visiting loved ones who are high-risk for serious infections, basic public health measures like masking, [social distancing](#) and [hand washing](#) can go a long way, said Dr. Gilberto Salazar, an emergency physician at Parkland Health and associate professor of emergency medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center.

"Folks who have [family members](#) who are particularly vulnerable, like very young children or folks with respiratory illnesses, I think they should proceed with caution," Salazar said. "I'm never going to be extreme about things, but having some additional caution is going to be worthwhile."

Prevention is key

Getting vaccinated is still one of the most effective ways to prevent getting severely sick from the flu or COVID-19. There is no RSV vaccination, although scientists are working to develop one.

The body takes about two weeks to develop antibodies against the viruses after vaccination, so it's not too late to get protected for holiday celebrations in December. It's safe to receive both the flu and COVID-19 vaccines on the same day.

Anyone 6 months and older can receive the flu shot and the initial COVID-19 vaccine series. The new bivalent booster dose, which protects against both the original and omicron COVID-19 strains, is available for anyone 5 and older who received their previous COVID-19 dose at least two months prior.

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