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Hochul urges New Yorkers to take steps to reduce risk of respiratory illnesses this holiday season

Encourages 'proven prevention measures to prevent severe illness, including vaccinations and good respiratory hygiene'

√ Respiratory virus cases, including RSV & flu, have increased at a rapid pace; COVID-19 continues to be 'significant threat'

Gov. Kathy Hochul on Monday urged New Yorkers to take precautions this holiday season to protect young children, older individuals and those with underlying health conditions, from respiratory viruses like RSV, influenza and coronavirus, as infections continue to rise nationwide.

Her team said, "With statewide travel and indoor gatherings prevalent around the Thanksgiving holiday, Gov. Hochul asked New Yorkers to take common prevention measures – like staying up to date on vaccines and practicing proper hygiene – to protect from these viruses and reduce the patient burden on local hospitals."

Hochul said, "As many New Yorkers look forward to gathering with friends and family during the Thanksgiving holiday, we should also embrace the commonsense measures we know to be effective at reducing the spread of respiratory illnesses. Be sure to stay up to date on vaccines – including flu shots and COVID-19 boosters. And if you do fall ill or develop symptoms, stay home and first seek treatment from your primary care provider."

A press release said, "RSV, influenza and COVID-19 can be especially dangerous for very young children, New Yorkers 65 and older and those with underlying health conditions. As a result of this threat, the state Department of Health issued a health advisory notice this fall to alert hospitals, local health departments, laboratories, emergency rooms, and other health care providers to remain vigilant against rising respiratory illnesses."

Department of Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett said, "While the simplest thing to do is regularly wash your hands and practice good respiratory hygiene, like covering your cough, one of the key things we learned

in our battle against COVID-19 is that wearing a well-fitting mask can also dramatically reduce the spread of other respiratory viruses, including flu and RSV. This holiday season, we can protect our children and elderly, keep our family out of the hospitals and reduce the pressure on our local health care system by taking many of the same protective measures that became commonplace from the outset of the pandemic more than two years ago, including masking in public indoor spaces."

The Department of Health's statewide surveillance of influenza found activity levels were geographically widespread for six consecutive weeks. The number of laboratory-confirmed flu cases reported to the agency has nearly tripled over the past three weeks, while hospitalizations have more than doubled.

The agency's weekly flu tracker displays the number of cases and hospitalizations across the state. This site is updated throughout flu season, which is typically October through May of the following calendar year.

Hochul's team said, "Nationally, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that between 1.6 million and 3.7 million people were sick with the flu in October; with between 760,000 and 1.8 million seeking a health care provider; and between 13,000 and 28,000 being hospitalized. Between 730 and 2,100 people died from the flu or flu-related causes last month, the federal agency estimates.

"Simultaneously, RSV cases continue to emerge with more frequency than recent years and can strain pediatric hospital capacity. A common respiratory virus, RSV can be especially harmful to older adults and very young children – particularly those under one year of age or born preterm."

To increase public awareness of RSV and to provide information for parents, guardians, and pediatricians, the Department of Health produced three videos to be shared on social media: A short clip and a longer version geared toward parents; and a version aimed specifically at health care providers. The videos "encourage New Yorkers to recognize the best measures for preventing the spread of RSV, managing symptoms and care, and how to protect loved ones at the greatest risk of getting very ill."

Hochul's team continued, "Meanwhile, COVID-19 continues to pose a significant threat, particularly for unvaccinated or under-vaccinated New Yorkers. COVID-19 is one of the leading causes of death in the United States; all New Yorkers 6 months of age and older should stay up to date with their shots, particularly those who are older or immunocompromised, as well as everyone 5 years and older who are eligible for the updated, bivalent booster dose.

This fall, New York State prepared for a potential increase in COVID-19 infections, which spiked during the fall and winter months for two consecutive years. Case levels remain at moderate levels as of now – between about 5 and 25 per 100,000 people in every region - and hospital admissions due to COVID-19 have been similarly steady and are now between approximately 0.6 and 2.3 per 100,000 in every region.

"On Nov. 16, 2,686 New Yorkers who tested positive for COVID-19 were hospitalized. The Department of Health also continues to conduct wastewater surveillance to check transmission levels in communities, enabling the agency to detect prospective surges statewide."

New Yorkers who test positive for COVID-19, but don't

have a health care provider, can call a new hotline or submit an online form to be evaluated for treatment. All New Yorkers are eligible regardless of income or health insurance coverage. Outside of New York City: Call 888-TREAT-NY (888-873-2869) or complete an evaluation at the NYS COVID-19 ExpressCare Therapeutics Access website. New York City residents should call 212-COVID-19.

To protect against respiratory viruses, the Department of Health recommends commonsense precautions, including:

- √ Staying up to date on vaccines, including flu and COVID-19.
- √ Washing your hands often with soap and hot water for least 20 seconds.
- √ Not coughing or sneezing into your hands.
- √ Regularly washing hands and using good hygiene.
- √ Staying home when sick or symptomatic.
- √ Wearing a well-fitting, high-quality mask when in public indoor spaces.

Individuals who have someone in their home who is higher risk, including those under 1 year of age, over 65 years of age, or with a compromised immune system, should be especially vigilant with mask wearing when outside the home or when others come into your home, with scientific evidence supporting this simple, precautionary measure.

Resources are also available to help New Yorkers make informed decisions about these viruses:

- √ Information about RSV.
- √ Information about the flu, including fact sheets and other downloadable materials.
- √ The COVID-19 website has resources for the public, schools, adult care facilities and medical laboratories.
- √ Information about vaccine efficacy.

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