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Shapiro Administration Encourages Pennsylvanians to Get Updated Vaccines as Respiratory Virus Season Begins

Harrisburg, PA – Leaders from the **Pennsylvania Departments of Health and Insurance** visited a Harrisburg pharmacy today to encourage all Pennsylvanians to stay up to date on their annual vaccinations to protect against flu, COVID-19, and RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) heading into respiratory disease season, which officially starts September 29.

“It is important to protect yourself and your family from severe illness by getting updated vaccinations before respiratory disease season kicks into high gear,” **said Secretary of Health Dr. Debra Bogen**. “Vaccines are now available across the state, and it is safe to get flu, COVID-19, and RSV vaccinations at the same time. The vaccines boost your body’s natural defenses against these viruses. Respiratory virus vaccines slow the spread of disease, prevent severe illness, and lower the likelihood of hospitalizations, especially among children, older adults, and people who have weakened immune systems.” During the 2023-2024 respiratory virus season, which took place between October 1, 2023, and September 21, 2024, there were 178,243 laboratory-confirmed flu cases and nearly 500 deaths; 72,477 emergency department visits with a COVID-19 diagnosis and over 2,000 deaths; and 55,757 confirmed RSV cases.

Most insurance plans cover COVID-19, flu, and RSV vaccinations, but for people who are underinsured or uninsured, the COVID-19 vaccine is available through local [State Health Centers](#) and [Federally Qualified Health Centers](#). For children who qualify, COVID-19 and flu vaccines, as well as other routine childhood immunizations are available at no cost through the [Vaccines for Children \(VFC\) Program](#).

“Pennsylvanians should not forego the flu or COVID vaccine because they fear an unexpected charge,” said **Pennsylvania Insurance Commissioner Michael Humphreys**. Cost shouldn’t be an obstacle to any Pennsylvanian who wants a flu or COVID vaccine. For insured Pennsylvanians, your health insurer must cover the full cost of certain recommended vaccines. If you go to an in-network provider, you will not have to pay anything – including a copay, coinsurance, or a deductible – for the flu or COVID vaccine.”

The COVID-19 and flu vaccinations are updated to protect against current virus variants circulating in Pennsylvania, and nationwide. Health care providers recommend these vaccinations for people six months and older. Vaccinations are especially important for high-risk groups including people 65 and older, people with certain medical conditions, and those at a higher risk of developing complications from respiratory illness. Early laboratory studies indicate that the 2024-2025 COVID vaccines will protect against severe disease caused by the new XEC variant.

For the second time after last year's introduction, a vaccine for RSV is available for people 60 and older and residents in their third trimester of pregnancy. Residents interested in getting vaccinated for RSV should contact their health care provider to determine eligibility and availability. For newborns and infants in their first winter season, there is also an RSV immunization available.

Respiratory viruses share similar symptoms, including fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, a runny or stuffy nose, headaches, body aches, chills, and fatigue.

For residents at higher risk for more serious illness due to age or health status, it is recommended to visit a health care provider and get tested early to be eligible for antiviral medications, which are available for the flu, COVID-19, and RSV. These medications ease symptoms, shorten the length of a viral infection and reduce the risk of serious health outcomes if started early in the illness course.

“All community pharmacists are prepared and ready for the busy vaccination season,” said **Paul Bowers, PharmD, Pharmacy Manager of See-Right Pharmacy in Harrisburg**. “We want our patients to have the most protection possible from circulating respiratory viruses and vaccination is the best way to protect yourself. Pharmacists are some of the most accessible health care practitioners in the community, and we are ready to address any questions or concerns patients may have about any vaccinations, seasonal or otherwise. Be sure to call your local pharmacy beforehand to inquire which vaccines you may be eligible for.”

If any consumer has questions about their insurance or an issue with their insurance, like a bill for a vaccine they should not have received, they may contact PID's Consumer Services Bureau [online](#) or by phone at 1-877-881-6388.

For more information and to find a nearby vaccination location visit [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov).

The Pennsylvania Department of Health will start providing weekly updates on the latest respiratory virus season statistics next week on the [respiratory virus dashboard](#) to keep residents informed.

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