



WHAT'S UP WITH THE TRIPLEDEMIC?

The news has been full of stories about the “triple epidemic” or “tripledeemic”. It is called that because we are seeing three different viral respiratory illnesses surge at the same time, namely COVID-19, Influenza, and RSV (respiratory syncytial virus). Masking, social distancing, remote learning, etc., which were necessary and effective in controlling COVID-19, meant that children, especially very young children, did not have the “normal” exposure to many respiratory viruses. Therefore, they did not produce the antibodies needed to fight the illnesses caused by those viruses. Some refer to this as the “immunity gap”. COVID-19, influenza and RSV are the big three, but there are many other respiratory viruses that cause illness in the fall and winter months. Rhinovirus, enterovirus, human metapneumovirus, and parainfluenza virus are some of the other culprits. Kids are being bombarded with all of these viruses now, and children's hospitals are running out of beds.

All respiratory viruses present with similar symptoms such as cough, runny nose, sore throat, headache and fever. Vomiting and diarrhea can sometimes be present, but they are rarely significant symptoms. Influenza often has a more sudden onset than the others, and body aches and fever can be more severe. Your healthcare provider can take a nasal swab and test for COVID-19, influenza, RSV, and/or some of the other viruses.

COVID-19 has been with us for three long years. Things are better, but Covid has not gone away. In the United States there are still hundreds of deaths every day, and thousands of hospitalizations. With the new Omicron variants, and more variants to come, we expect it to worsen this winter. Kids are back in school and the cold weather will force us all to spend more time indoors. Close contact means increased spread of all viruses. Many experts expect Covid to become an endemic (regularly found) virus that will peak every winter, just like influenza.



Influenza, also known as “the flu”, is epidemic every year, usually peaking in mid to late winter. This year the flu is already spreading rapidly. In fact, for this early in the flu season, this has been the worst year for hospitalizations since the flu season of 2010-2011. The flu is not just the common cold. It is a respiratory illness that can be very serious. It tends to be more severe for the very young, the very old, and those with chronic medical conditions. Every year in the United States there are millions of cases and many thousands of deaths due to the flu. During an average flu season in the US, about 100 children will die from influenza.



RSV, respiratory syncytial virus, is the new kid on the block. It is actually not new at all, but it has also come early this year. And because of the “immunity gap” mentioned above, it is rampant and more severe than in normal years. Most adults and older children exposed to RSV will experience mild common cold symptoms. However, in younger children (especially infants), older adults, and those with chronic medical conditions, RSV can cause significant issues such as wheezing, difficulty breathing, and difficulty feeding. This can lead to the need for oxygen, a breathing tube, and/or intravenous fluids. RSV is the number one cause of hospitalization in children under one year of age.

The most effective treatment is to prevent illness in the first place. For both Covid and influenza, there are very safe and very effective vaccines. There is almost no medical reason to not get these vaccines. Immunizing yourself and your children is by far the most important measure to prevent Covid and the flu. Vaccines may not be 100% effective in preventing illness, but those who are vaccinated will rarely experience hospitalization or death.

We learned from Covid that precautions such as handwashing, masking, physical distancing, and staying home when sick are very effective strategies to prevent respiratory illness. We need to continue to follow those measures. That does not mean that we need to restart strict precautions such as closing schools or always staying at home. We need to do the simple things, such as avoiding crowded situations when possible, and masking when crowded situations cannot be avoided.



We cannot cure or get rid of Covid, influenza, or RSV. We can, however, do a lot to protect ourselves and others and lessen the burden of these illnesses.

Have a wonderful holiday season and a healthy, happy, and joyful 2023!

Happy New Year!