

UPSTATE

MEDICAL UNIVERSITY

Nov. 22, 2021

A letter to the Central New York community:

As winter approaches, experts from Upstate Medical University want to remind you about the importance of protecting yourself and your family from Covid-19. Our goal is to have all families enjoy the winter months by participating in safe in-person activities—including holiday activities. We advocate to minimize the risk for Covid infections and exposures.

Vaccination—including getting your booster shot—is a critical tool you can use to protect you and your loved ones. Masking and washing your hands also provide benefits. Our recommendations are based on the best available scientific research and expert advice.

COVID-19 IS STILL HERE: Covid is still circulating in our community and dramatically rising. We have more cases of Covid in our community than this time last year.

Why are infections rising?

Reason 1: There is still a large group of unvaccinated individuals in our area. Unvaccinated people are at higher risk for severe disease, hospitalization, and death. Even healthy unvaccinated people can get very sick from Covid and end up in the hospital, intensive care unit or die. The unvaccinated remain the main driver of Covid infections in our community. Thankfully, the current Covid vaccines remain very effective at preventing most infections, hospitalization, and death. However, protection is not 100 percent. Vaccinated people can still get infected and be contagious to others. Breakthrough infections can occur and people may unknowingly transmit infection to others if they are unmasked.

Reason 2: Many people have stopped protecting themselves from Covid. It is important to use all tools available to protect ourselves including: vaccination, masking, physical distancing, and handwashing. We have to use multiple tools/strategies together for the highest level of protection—no tool is 100% effective.

Reason 3: Many viral respiratory illnesses spread more quickly during periods when people move indoors during the cold and warm months. Here in Central New York, we are preparing to see new spikes in Covid cases as our interactions increasingly occur in indoor (less-ventilated) spaces.

Reason 4: Covid remains highly transmissible and continues to cause serious disease in some people. The current Covid strain is more contagious than other viruses like Ebola, common cold, flu, and smallpox.

WHY WE CARE: Our hospitals are extremely stressed, people are being hospitalized, and people are still dying from Covid. The majority of people being hospitalized and dying from Covid are people who are unvaccinated.

Recommendations to Stay Safe: There is abundant evidence that shows vaccination, wearing a mask, physically distancing, and hand washing can help keep you protected.

- Get Vaccinated. Still about 1 in 3 people in our county are not yet vaccinated. Get a booster shot on the schedule recommended for you. The more people who get vaccinated, the less spread we have within the community, and the less likelihood that our hospitals will become overwhelmed with patients sick with Covid. Until we have vaccine for children under 5, the best protection is vaccinating individuals around them.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, or use the inside of your elbow. Throw used tissues in the trash.
- Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water is not available, clean your hands with hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Wearing a mask in crowded indoor settings and for activities with close contact with others who are not fully vaccinated and/or their vaccination status is unknown.
- When possible, practice physical distancing—stay at least six feet away from others in public places.
- Get tested. It is still important for people sick with Covid to isolate.

We are all members of this community. We deeply care about the health and wellbeing of our community. We recognize the importance of winter activities and the holiday season. We encourage everyone to continue to follow best practices to stay safe and to maintain high vigilance at this time.

Our unequivocal recommendation is for everyone to get vaccinated and to keep their mask on when in public. We also encourage you to use other tools such as hand washing, respiratory etiquette and physical distancing to give your further protection. These measures will help protect you and your loved ones from contracting this deadly disease.

Signed by Upstate Medical University experts from the following departments:

Geriatrics

Infection Prevention

Medicine

Microbiology and Immunology

Pediatrics

Public Health and Preventive Medicine