



MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH &
SENIOR SERVICES**

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Media Contact:

[Lisa Cox](#)

Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services

Stay protected this respiratory illness season

It's not too late to vaccinate

JEFFERSON CITY, MO—Respiratory illness season has begun, and state and local health officials encourage everyone to protect themselves and their loved ones from respiratory viruses and diseases circulating this winter, including influenza (flu), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), COVID-19 and pertussis (whooping cough). Vaccination remains a key tool to prevent illness, reduce severe symptoms and protect Missouri communities.

Each of these illnesses can spread quickly and have the ability to lead to serious illness, especially among those who are pregnant or have underlying health conditions or among young children and older adults. Vaccination, along with everyday preventive measures, offers strong protection against these viruses and diseases.

Influenza (Flu)

The flu vaccine can lower the risk of serious flu complications and hospitalizations. This year's flu shot targets the strains predicted to circulate most widely. Since the flu season typically peaks in winter months, it's still beneficial to get vaccinated to reduce the risk of infection and transmission. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) [recommends](#) everyone age 6 months and older receive the updated 2024-2025 influenza vaccine.

“There are also concerning overlapping dangers of the risk of flu with our high burden of chronic disease in Missouri,” said Dr. Heidi Miller, chief medical officer with the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS). “Heart disease remains the number one cause of death among Missourians, and 9 of 10 adults hospitalized for flu have preexisting heart disease or other chronic conditions. The risk of heart attack is 6-fold higher during the one week after influenza is diagnosed.”

Missouri's interactive [flu dashboard](#) is updated weekly with statewide and county-level flu data.

[View photos of Governor Mike Parson and First Lady Teresa Parson receiving their annual flu shots earlier this month.](#)

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

RSV, a common virus that can cause severe respiratory infections in infants and older adults, is also preventable. RSV vaccines are now available both for older adults and for pregnant women to protect newborns. Immunizations are also available for infants at high risk.

- RSV most often spreads between October through March. The following groups should get immunized:
 - Adults aged 75 and older.
 - Adults aged 60-74 at [increased risk](#).
 - [Pregnant women](#) who are 32-36 weeks pregnant from September through January.
 - [Babies younger than 8 months](#) – as early as possible, especially as newborn.
 - [Children ages 8-19 months](#) who are at high risk for severe RSV.

Pharmacists cannot provide RSV vaccines without a health care provider's prescription.

COVID-19

COVID-19 remains a concern as new variants emerge. COVID-19 vaccines and updated boosters provide protection against severe illness and hospitalization.

- This season's updated vaccine is available without a prescription and [recommended by the CDC](#) for everyone age 6 months and up and especially for high-risk individuals.
- In addition, the CDC recommends a second dose of the 2024-2025 COVID-19 vaccine for people 65 years and older and those who are moderately or severely immunocompromised 6 months after their first dose.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services renewed its COVID-19 test program, allowing people to order four free over-the-counter COVID-19 tests per family. These tests will detect the [currently circulating COVID-19 variants](#) and are intended for use through the end of 2024. People can also find instructions on how to verify [extended expiration dates](#) for any tests they may already have. To request a free COVID-19 test, visit [COVIDtests.gov](#).

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Though not a virus, [pertussis](#), or whooping cough, is a contagious respiratory disease caused by bacteria that can be especially dangerous for young children. The **Tdap** vaccine, recommended for adults and adolescents, protects against pertussis, as well as tetanus and diphtheria. Infants and young children should follow the recommended **DTaP** vaccine schedule, and expectant mothers should receive Tdap in the third trimester to protect their newborns.

Whooping cough cases have been on the rise already in 2024 throughout the country. Missouri is currently experiencing a severalfold increase in the [rate of cases](#) statewide. The rate of Missouri kindergartners vaccinated with DTap has steadily dropped 4% from the 2019-2020 school year to the 2023-2024 school year.

A person with whooping cough is contagious for up to 21 days after the onset of a cough if they do not take antibiotics. Early diagnosis and antibiotic treatment may shorten the amount of time someone is contagious.

Some people should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting sick if they have been around someone with whooping cough. This should be discussed with the individual's health care provider.

Other ways to prevent respiratory illnesses

Everyone can take simple, effective steps to reduce the spread of these respiratory illnesses by washing hands frequently with soap and water, cleaning frequently touched surfaces, covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or elbow, getting plenty of regular sleep, and staying home when sick to prevent spreading illness to others.

Vaccines are available at most [local public health agencies](#), [pharmacies](#) and health care providers; however, pharmacists cannot provide RSV vaccines without a health care provider's prescription. Additionally, the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, provides free vaccines through providers to children who qualify. [Learn more and find a VFC provider at this link.](#)

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The Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) promotes health and safety in Missouri through prevention, collaboration, education, innovation and response. The vision of DHSS is the optimal health and safety for all Missourians, in all communities, for life. Learn more at health.mo.gov.

