US faces triple epidemic of flu, RSV, and covid

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The US is now in a flu epidemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and faces a triple epidemic of flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) in young children, and covid-19, as cases rise and new variants appear.1–3

Many precautions, such as mask wearing and social distancing, have been discarded and few Americans have taken the latest bivalent vaccines, behavioural changes that may have contributed to the spread of the viruses.

The CDC has reported that the early increases in seasonal influenza cases have continued nationwide. The south eastern and south central areas of the country had the highest levels of activity followed by the mid-Atlantic and the south central west coast regions. A second child is reported to have died from influenza.4

So far this season, the CDC estimates there have been at least 1 600 000 illnesses, 13 000 hospital admissions, and 730 deaths from flu. It recommended that people over six months old receive an annual flu vaccine.4

Jose Romero, director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, said, “We’re seeing the highest influenza hospital admission rates for a decade.”

At the same time, cases of RSV have increased across most of the country. Most children get an RSV infection and recover by the time they are two years old. RSV has symptoms similar to a cold or flu, but it can be dangerous and sometimes fatal. There is no vaccine, although several are in development.

RSV is especially dangerous for premature infants, infants younger than six months, children younger than two years old who have chronic lung disease or congenital heart disease, children with weakened immune systems, and children who have neuromuscular disorders, including those who have difficulty swallowing or clearing mucus secretions. RSV can cause severe illness such as bronchiolitis and pneumonia. The CDC said that 1–2% of children younger than six months with RSV infection may need to be admitted to hospital—58 000 to 80 000 children each year.5

RSV can also be serious for older adults and an infection can worsen chronic health problems such as asthma or congestive heart failure.

Covid-19 cases and hospital admissions are rising modestly for the first time in several months but have increased dramatically in several states in the south and west. Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah have seen a 50% increase in cases in the past two weeks, according to the New York Times tracker. Hospital admissions have increased by 20% or more in eight states. Deaths have remained at about 350 per day.6

Until recently the BA.5 variant was the most common, but two new variants—BQ.1.1 and BQ.1—are increasing from about 3% of cases two weeks ago to about 11% now.7


