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Flu surge and vaccine woes: A strained healthcare system faces its toughest season in years

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<https://www.chartis.com/insights/flu-surge-and-vaccine-woes-strained-healthcare-system-faces-its-toughest-season-years>

The Buzz This Week

Despite a slow start, this year's flu season is now considered "high severity" for all age groups, with US flu levels the highest they've been in 15 years. In recent weeks, a second wave of the virus has resulted in an increasing number of infections.

The week six CDC Weekly US surveillance report from earlier this month shows that 7.8% of visits to healthcare providers were for respiratory illness, which includes flu. The report also states that flu statistics are trending upward, including positive flu infections (31.6%), patients admitted to hospitals with the flu this week (50,382), and number of deaths attributed to the flu this week (2.6%).

The severity of pediatric flu cases is especially concerning this year, as 86 flu-related pediatric deaths have occurred to date. Some pediatric cases even included serious neurological complications. According to the president and chief executive officer of the Children's Hospital Association, this year is shaping up to be worse than last year's record of 200 pediatric flu deaths. Earlier in February, some schools and even entire school districts closed temporarily in Texas, Ohio, Oklahoma, Georgia, Virginia, and Tennessee due to high rates of respiratory illness.

In addition to increased flu rates, norovirus has surged to levels not seen in more than a decade. The outbreaks in early January reached the highest level for this time of year since 2012, according to CDC data. RSV rates also remain elevated in many areas of the country. Despite the increase in these viruses, COVID-19 infections have been declining.

Why It Matters

The increase in flu activity has placed significant pressure on the US healthcare system. Earlier this month, outpatient visits for flu-like illness reached the highest weekly rate since the 2009-10 swine flu pandemic. Flu hospitalizations have also surpassed those for COVID-19 for the first time since the pandemic. According to data from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from February 9 to 15, flu patients accounted for 5% of occupied hospital beds nationwide.

The flu season may be more severe this year due to the decline in rates of seasonal flu vaccinations, in combination with a less effective vaccine than in a typical year. This year's vaccine reduces the risk of hospitalization by 35%, rather than the usual 45%. Influenza vaccination rates in children are at their lowest level in 6 years, according to the CDC. For the 2024-2025 season, fewer than half of Americans (roughly 45%) have been vaccinated, according to the government agency. Experts suggest misinformation about vaccines and post-COVID-19 vaccine fatigue may be contributing to these lower rates.

Meanwhile, the Trump Administration terminated a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) flu vaccine campaign and indefinitely suspended a public meeting of the CDC's vaccine advisory committee, which was set to review the effectiveness of influenza vaccines. The US Food and Drug Administration also canceled the March advisory committee meeting to select the strains to be included in next season's flu shot.

The recent executive order withdrawing the US from the World Health Organization (WHO) has also left public health officials flying blind since they're unable to get flu data from global sharing platforms like FluNet and FluID. The limited data access has ramifications for next year's vaccine since the global body helps determine the composition of the updated annual vaccine, though the administration confirmed this week that the US is participating in the WHO's vaccine consultation meeting despite the withdrawal.

Additional concerns exist as this year's record-breaking flu season coincides with the spread of avian flu throughout the US. Human cases have been mostly restricted to dairy and poultry farms. However, experts fear that the more people who catch the flu, the greater the chances are of infection with both viruses. Such instances could allow the viruses to mix and eventually create an avian flu strain that could spread between humans and become more dangerous.

Given this year's compounding factors, concern exists over what future virus seasons could hold. The impact on population health and the strain on healthcare providers are top concerns, especially if vaccination rates continue to decline and infection rates continue to rise.

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