

# Flu, norovirus cases spike

Other respiratory illnesses also rise across Long Island

## ONLY IN NEWSDAY

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If it seems like almost everyone is sick on Long Island, it's because they are.

Cases of flu are soaring while other respiratory viruses and the dreaded stomach illness, norovirus, are taking over classrooms, households and workplaces.

"Probably since the holidays there's definitely an uptick with flu, respiratory viruses are kicking up and then it's mixed with viral fevers," said Nicole Ladd, a nurse practitioner with Allied Pediatrics of Rocky Point.

Ladd said people need to stay home from work and school if they are sick — but that isn't always happening.

"We had a kid who went into school to take a midterm with 103 fever," she said. "This is a problem because now you are infecting everybody else."

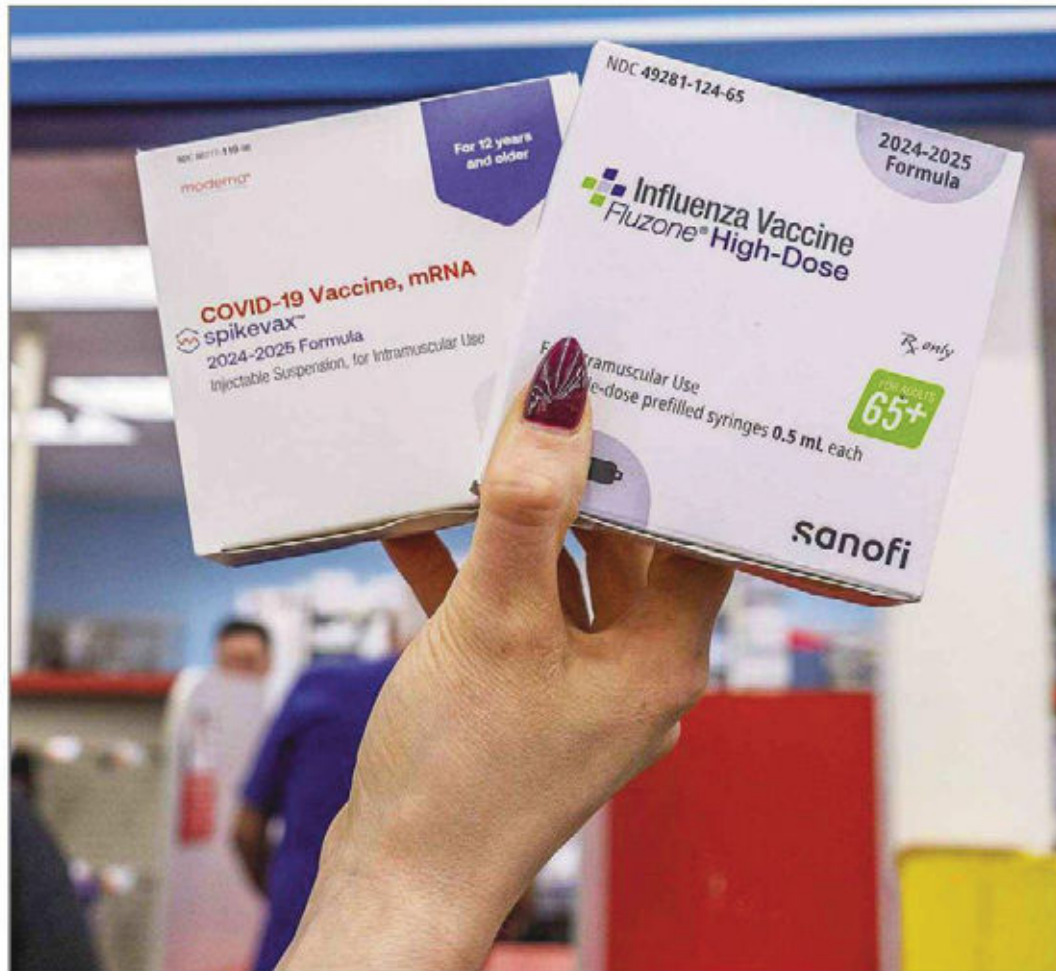
### Influenza on the rise

Over the last two years, flu season peaked in December and then slowly declined in the following weeks.

This year, lab-confirmed cases of influenza have been steadily rising with 32,218 new cases in the state the week ending Jan. 11 for a total of 128,509 this season, according to state Health Department data.

There were 3,434 new lab-confirmed cases in Suffolk County for that week and 3,689 in Nassau. Each of the counties has over 14,000 cases so far this year. Lab-confirmed cases only represent a portion of flu cases since many people stay home sick and are not tested.

Norovirus, which causes bouts of vomiting and diarrhea, is only tracked by outbreaks — not individual cases. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said so far the number of outbreaks reported in the current seasons are above the range during the same period in 2012 to 2020



Flu cases are soaring, while COVID-19 cases are rising, but less than half of what they were last year.

### WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **Flu and other respiratory viruses** are circulating heavily on Long Island.
- **Kids under 5 and people over 65** should contact their doctors if they contract any of these viruses because they are at a higher risk for severe illness.
- **Washing your hands, getting a flu shot and keeping surfaces germ-free** are important ways to reduce the spread of viruses.

and 2021 to 2024. The most recent data on their site shows 91 outbreaks as of early December 2024.

"New York State has reported somewhat of an increase in certain regions," Nassau County Health Commissioner Irina Gelman said during a recent briefing. "How-

ever, the metropolitan area region has not experienced a similar steep increase just yet. . . . Norovirus activity often picks up this time of year, partly due to the increased travel and holiday gatherings."

On a positive note, experts have said cases of RSV seem to have peaked in December and are on their way down. And reported positive cases of COVID-19 are slowly climbing but less than half of what they were a year ago. The seven-day average of positive tests on Long Island was 9.5% on Jan. 20 compared with 30.3% on Jan. 20, 2024, according to state figures.

### When to call the doctor

But if you are just feeling miserable with any of these symptoms — fever, coughing, aches, vomiting — do you really need to figure out which of these viruses you have? Experts say it depends on the severity of your symptoms and your personal

risk for serious illness.

"If it's a child less than 5 years of age or if it's a person above 65 years of age, there should be a low threshold of seeking medical attention," said Dr. Asif Noor, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at NYU Langone Hospital—Long Island.

People with chronic medical conditions or on medications that suppress their immune systems should also not wait to call their doctor.

Noor said norovirus, which comes on abruptly, causing nausea, vomiting and then diarrhea, is easy to identify. But flu, COVID-19 and RSV can be more difficult to tell apart, he said, although there are subtle differences.

"With flu, you will have more muscle aches pains and high fevers; sore throat and coughing with RSV, and sore throat and headaches with COVID-19," he said.

One caveat: If the sick person

is having trouble breathing or is not able to drink enough fluids and seems dehydrated, they should seek immediate medical attention.

People who are otherwise healthy and fall ill don't necessarily need to see a doctor unless their symptoms do not resolve in two or three days, Noor said. For the most part, they will recover by resting, drinking lots of fluids and taking over-the-counter fever and pain medications.

But if they don't, they need a medical assessment and testing to figure out which virus they do have. In some cases, they can be treated with Tamiflu for influenza or Paxlovid for COVID-19.

"Keep them home," Ladd said. "Be considerate of others because some people are immunocompromised and they are relying on the community to keep them safe."

### Preventing the spread

Experts said people can protect themselves against these viruses by taking a few simple steps.

Hand washing for at least 20 seconds with soap is a key way to stop viruses from spreading, Gelman said. It is also more effective against norovirus than alcohol-based hand sanitizer, she added. Norovirus is spread through very small particles of feces and vomit.

Gelman also encouraged people to clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces such as doorknobs and phones.

Infectious disease experts said people who are eligible for the flu, COVID-19 and RSV vaccines, should get them because even if they can't prevent the illness, they can lessen the severity.

However, clinicians including Ladd in Rocky Point have reported fewer people requesting flu vaccines in recent years — possibly due to COVID-19 vaccine fatigue and the pandemic. The number of young New Yorkers vaccinated against flu has dropped in recent years. As of Jan. 4, 47.4% of people between the ages of 6 months and 17 years were vaccinated, down from 55.5% on the same day in 2024 and lower than 59.7% on the same day in 2020, according to statistics from the CDC.