

MACOMB DAILY

OPINION

It might be snowing, but it's time to share your umbrella to prevent flu, RSV

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A serious illness called respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is spreading across our communities, infecting our youngest, most vulnerable family members. Hospital pediatric beds are filling up, which means they can no longer accept new patients. While there isn't yet a vaccine for RSV, there are a few things we can do to protect ourselves and our loved ones, especially as we head into the holiday season and family gatherings.

It's essential that we avoid outbreaks of other serious diseases like the flu while RSV is spreading. Flu season has arrived early, and stronger than in years past. Cases are rising, and that's likely to continue the next couple of months. The CDC estimates that in October 2022, there were already at least 1.6 million flu illnesses, at least 760,000 flu medical visits, and at least 13,000 flu hospitalizations.

With RSV straining pediatric hospitals across the state, we must protect ourselves and those around us by getting our annual flu vaccination. Flu vaccination is safe, effective, and helps keep you and your loved ones out of the doctor's office and out of the hospital, which matters now more than ever.

As a parent, you want to make the right choices for your child to best protect them. But vaccination is not just a personal choice. Your decision affects the health of all children in your community, including your own. The vaccinated community helps to protect those who are not vaccinated, a concept known as "herd immunity" or "community immunity." When 90–95 percent of a community is protected, it is nearly impossible for a vaccine-preventable disease to spread.

Community immunity is an umbrella of protection. Think of germs as rain, and hand washing as a raincoat. Vaccination is an umbrella. If you put on a raincoat, you're protecting just yourself. But if you use an umbrella, you can protect both yourself and those around you. The umbrella is "community immunity." Those who don't vaccinate rely on others to share their umbrella when it rains. But we need our communities to invest in umbrellas together. Newborns rely on their parents and caregivers to offer protection by sharing their umbrellas.

Think of your next-door neighbor who is pregnant, your immunocompromised grandparent, your friend battling cancer. They're also counting on you to get vaccinated against the flu to help protect them.

When you schedule your appointment to get the flu shot, it's a great time to make sure you and your family are up to date on all routine vaccinations. From COVID-19 to your child's measles,

whooping cough and polio vaccines, it's so important that we're all as protected as possible against vaccine-preventable diseases.

If you have questions, that's a good thing. It makes you a great parent. Determining how best to protect our children can be overwhelming and confusing – make sure you're getting answers from your family physician or pediatrician as well as credible sources based on evidence-based medical science and research like IVaccinate.org. Find a flu vaccine site near you and make an appointment at Michigan.gov/Flu.

— Dr. Beena Nagappala, MD, MPH, a family physician of 20 years, presently works part-time in a busy family medicine group practice where she is involved with quality and compliance initiatives for the group and her practice. She also serves as medical director of community health for Ascension Southeast Michigan, overseeing medical care provided through the organization's 24 school-based clinics in and around Metro Detroit, and volunteers at HUDA clinic and MAPI Charitable clinic where she is the clinic director.