

'If there's one year to get your flu shot ...' Bracing for more demand, Ontario seeks safe ways to vaccinate during COVID-19

May Warren

The race is on for a [COVID-19](#) vaccine, with scientists working around the clock to discover the key to stopping the potentially deadly disease.

But health officials are also planning for how they can safely administer hundreds of thousands of doses of a vaccine that's already available, to prevent a perfect storm of infection in the fall.

They're bracing for more demand while trying to navigate how they'll deliver that vaccine in a new COVID reality that makes mass immunization clinics tricky.

"If there's one year to get your flu shot, this is going to be the year," said Dr. Natasha Crowcroft, a senior technical adviser for measles and rubella at the World Health Organization and professor in the Centre for Vaccine Preventable Diseases, at the University of Toronto.

Every year, flu season means a surge of patients at hospitals that can strain health-care systems even without any coronavirus. Both at once could be a dangerous combination.

The good news is measures like hand washing, physical distancing and masks could mean less flu, but "the risk if you do get it is going to be higher," Crowcroft said.

"Flu can really knock the socks off people, and then they're going to be much more vulnerable to COVID-19."

In Australia, where the flu season is already underway, there's been a drop in cases due to COVID lockdowns but there has also been increased demand for the vaccine, from people wanting to protect themselves, [the Guardian reported](#) in May. Other countries including the U.K. are considering making the flu vaccine universal, and scrambling to stock up on doses to prepare for the flu hitting at the same time as a possible COVID resurgence during the colder months. Both viruses thrive inside, where they're more easily spread.

In Ontario, where the flu vaccine is free for anyone who wants it, the province has "procured more influenza doses than last season," said health ministry spokesperson Alexandra Hilkene in an email, and officials are looking to purchase additional doses to meet the demand.

Planning for the universal flu vaccine immunization program is underway, taking into account COVID-19, she added, and more details will be available later this summer.

In Toronto, health officials are already starting to think about what that might look like.

“In terms of our vaccination clinics we obviously have to take a different approach this year,” said Dr. Vinita Dubey, an associate medical officer of health for Toronto Public Health.

The agency typically holds clinics at places such as shelters, she said. They’re thinking of offering smaller clinics, and even considering drive-thru or at-home vaccinations.

The public should also expect that it won’t be as easy as strolling into a Shoppers Drug Mart or No Frills pharmacy on a whim.

“You won’t just easily walk in and get a flu vaccine,” she said. “There will be precautions that will have to be on board.

“This is the time to consider a whole host of options for providing the vaccine.”

They can’t start offering the vaccine until they get it from the province, which gets it from the feds. The best time to get it is fall, before the height of the flu season, which can continue into the spring. If a COVID vaccine is available around that same time, that’s something that could complicate or delay the manufacturing.

“Vaccine manufacturing is actually not as nimble as we might like because it’s so rigorous,” she said. “I think this is a very real thing to consider.”

The flu vaccine is only about 50 per cent effective year over year, Dubey added, depending on what vaccine it is for which strain, which the WHO recommends at the beginning of the year. But “being able to prevent even half of the cases is going to be extremely important,” she said.

“Every year during flu season we see people that are vulnerable have to go to the hospital,” said Dr. Azim Kasmani, public health and preventive medicine resident physician at Kingston, Frontenac, and Lennox & Addington Public Health. “And some young people, too, they get very sick. Some people need ventilators and ICU.

“If we have both viruses circulating at the same time, it could place a tremendous amount of stress on our acute care system.”

It’s also going to be hard to tell if you have the flu or COVID, because the symptoms are very similar, so it’s best to avoid getting the flu if you can, he said.

That’s why Kingston’s Board of Health is calling for a mass immunization plan from all levels of government for the coming season, and ensuring that there’s enough flu vaccine to go around.

“I think there will be more demand and more people seeking it out, so we want to make sure that the influenza vaccine is available for people to get,” he said.

The logistics of delivering the vaccine will be more challenging than last year, or in 2009 during H1N1, when everyone could at least be in the same room for a large vaccination clinic.

Some people may also be nervous to get a flu vaccine, said Crowcroft, because of COVID risk, and they’re the ones who probably need it most because many of them are also at a higher risk if they get the flu.

Trusted health-care providers can help get the message out on this. She also urges

people to get the [shingles](#) (free in Ontario for adults 65-70) and [pneumonia vaccines](#) (free to people over 65), if they qualify.

“Even if there’s less flu around, you want to do everything you can to stay as healthy as possible,” she said.

COVID is much more deadly than the flu, but the flu can be serious and even kill. It’s especially dangerous for the very old, very young, and people with medical conditions such as asthma, or weakened immune systems.

So we’re lucky to have both a vaccine and treatments that people should take advantage of, said Toronto Public Health’s Dubey.

“If anything, COVID kind of shows us, when we don’t have these things, we get stuck.”

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