Report to the Boards of Health

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Staying Healthy During Holiday Gatherings

The holiday season brings family, friends, and, unfortunately, more chances to get sick. During this time, illnesses like influenza (the flu), COVID-19, RSV, and norovirus are more common. These spread easily when people gather for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year celebrations. Knowing how these illnesses spread and taking simple steps to stay healthy can help you enjoy the holidays safely.

Why Illness Spreads During the Holidays

Holiday gatherings often happen indoors with many people in close contact. Poor ventilation and long visits make it easier for illnesses to spread. Sharing kitchens and food can also lead to germs spreading through food. Traveling and visiting people from different places adds more chances for exposure. Older adults and young children are especially at risk when large families gather.

Many viruses spread before symptoms show. A person may feel fine while cooking or hugging family but already be contagious. This makes it important to use prevention strategies, not just rely on how people feel.

Current Illness Trends and Predictions

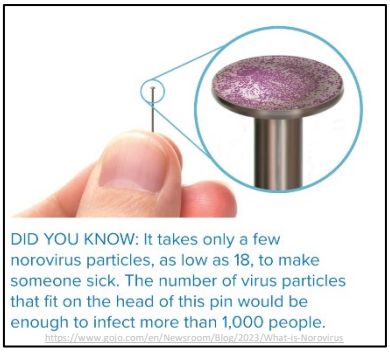
While still low, flu, COVID-19, and RSV should be common again this year and normally peak between December and February. Norovirus, which causes vomiting and diarrhea, has also been rising across the country and locally. It also normally peaks between December and February. It spreads very easily, especially through contaminated food or close contact. Other foodborne illnesses like salmonella and the “holiday bug” (Clostridium perfringens) also increase during the holidays, often from undercooked or mishandled foods.

How Respiratory Illnesses Spread

Flu, COVID-19, and RSV spread through droplets when people cough, sneeze, talk, or breathe. Because they can spread before symptoms start, someone can infect others without realizing it. These viruses spread fastest indoors, especially in places with poor airflow. When the droplets land, the virus can contaminate surfaces. Touching contaminated surfaces and then your face can also spread infection.

Norovirus: The Stomach Bug

Norovirus deserves special attention because it is so very contagious and often connected to holiday get-togethers and food service. Only a few viral particles can cause infection, and an infected person can shed billions of viral particles in vomit and stool, explaining why norovirus is the leading cause of foodborne illness in the United States. It can live for days on surfaces and survive both heat and cold. **Hand sanitizer doesn’t kill it**—only handwashing with soap and water works. It can be cleaned from contaminated surfaces with bleach solutions. Symptoms include vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, and stomach pain.



Food Safety Basics

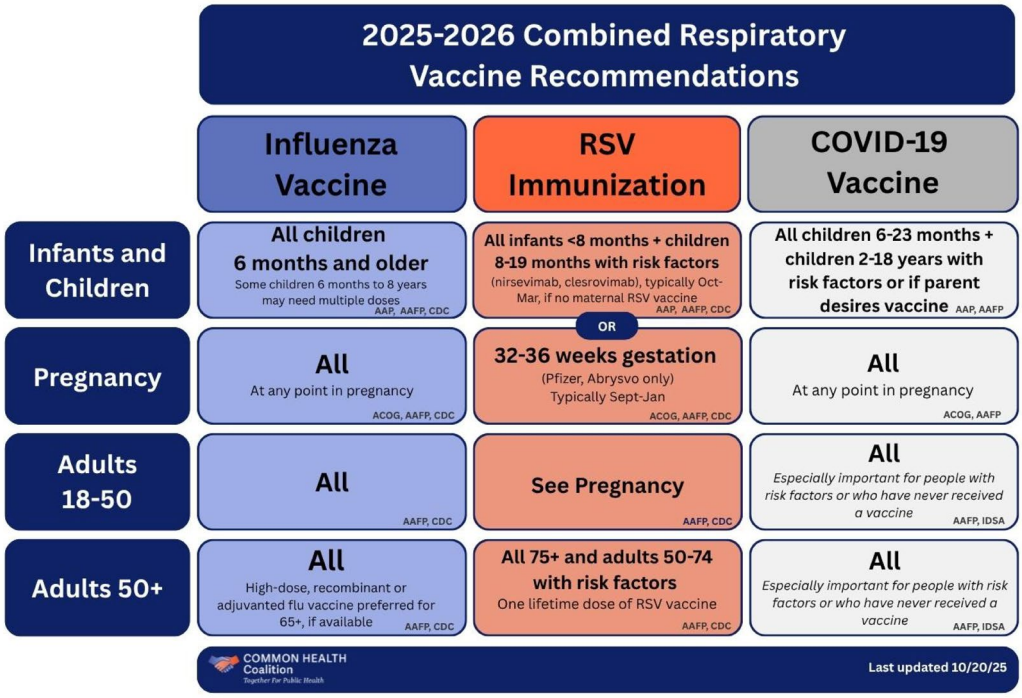
Beyond norovirus, other germs can pose a risk. Bacteria grow quickly between 40°F to 140°F so keeping hot food hot and cold food cold is one of the best ways to prevent foodborne illness. **Safe cooking temperatures** are important as is using a food thermometer to confirm food is ready:

- Chicken, turkey, and all poultry: 165°F
- Ground meats: 160°F
- Beef, pork, lamb roasts: 145°F with 3-minute rest time
- Ham: Raw - 145°F with 3-minute rest time; Precooked - 165°F
- Reheated leftovers: 165°F
- Gravies and sauces: rolling boil

Don't leave perishable food out for more than two hours and store leftovers within two hours. If you aren't sure if food is safe, throw it out.

Vaccines Help Protect Everyone

The 2025-2026 season offers vaccines for all three major respiratory viruses—influenza, COVID-19, and RSV, as well as other preventable contagious illnesses such as pneumococcal pneumonia and pertussis (whooping cough). Getting vaccinated before holiday gatherings provides important protection.



Stay Home When Sick

If you have symptoms like fever, cough, sore throat, vomiting, or diarrhea, stay home. You can return to normal activities after 24 hours with no fever (without using fever medicine) and when your symptoms are improving. For stomach illness, wait at least 48 hours after your symptoms end before seeing others.

Hosts should tell guests to stay home if sick and allow plans to change easily. If you get sick after an event, tell others who attended.

Improve Air Quality

Good airflow lowers the chance of spreading illness:

- Open windows when possible.
- Run HVAC fans on “ON” instead of “AUTO.”
- Use high-efficiency (MERV-13 or HEPA) filters.
- Use portable air purifiers in main rooms.
- Run exhaust fans during gatherings.

Handwashing: Simple but Important

Wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds:

- Before eating and preparing food
- After using the bathroom or changing diapers
- After coughing, sneezing, or touching pets

And remember - **hand sanitizer doesn’t work against norovirus**, so always use soap and water.

Layered Protection Works Best

Combining several prevention steps keeps everyone safer:

- Get vaccinated
- Stay home when sick
- Improve ventilation
- Wash hands often
- Follow food safety rules
- Mask in crowded spaces if desired
- Test for illness before gatherings if needed

Protecting Higher-Risk Family Members

Older adults, young children, pregnant people, and those with chronic illnesses should take extra care. Encourage vaccination for these family members and those around them, consider smaller gatherings, or added precautions like masks when needed.

Recommendations:

1. **Get vaccinated now if you haven’t already.** See the table above for flu, COVID-19, and RSV vaccine recommendation. All three can be given the same visit.
2. **Prioritize food safety.** Emphasize the importance of using food thermometers and the two-hour rule, and don’t prepare any food if you haven’t felt well in the past 2 days.
3. **Normalize staying home when sick.** Support clear communication that sick individuals should not attend gatherings and be flexible about cancelling if needed.

Resources:

- Respiratory virus Data Dashboards
    - **PopHIVE** https://www.pophive.org/: Developed by Yale School of Public Health and integrates data from several sources
    - **Respiratory Illness Index** https://www.walgreens.com/seasonal/respiratory-illness-index: Run by Walgreens, using data from their store flu and COVID-19 test results, antiviral prescription sales, and sale of over the couter cold and flu medication.

- CDC Holiday Health: https://www.cdc.gov/ncird/whats-new/reduce-your-risk-from-respiratory-viruses-this-holiday-season.html
- CDC Food Safety: https://www.cdc.gov/food-safety
- CDC About Norovirus: https://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/about/index.html
- CDC Preventing Spread When Sick: https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/prevention/precautions-when-sick.html
- CDC Handwashing: https://www.cdc.gov/clean-hands/about/index.html
- CDC Ventilation: https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/ventilation/prevention/index.html
- FoodSafety.gov Holiday Tips: https://www.foodsafety.gov/blog/food-safety-tips-holidays
- FDA Food Safety Tips for Healthy Holidays: https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/food-safety-tips-healthy-holidays
- USDA Safe Thanksgiving Guide: https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/poultry/your-safe-thanksgiving-guide

Sources

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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About Norovirus. https://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/about/index.html
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NoroSTAT Data. https://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/php/reporting/norostat-data.html
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About *C. perfringens* food poisoning. https://www.cdc.gov/clostridium-perfringens/about/index.html
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Estimates: Burden of Foodborne Illness in the United States. https://www.cdc.gov/food-safety/php/data-research/foodborne-illness-burden/index.html