Flu resurging, COVID-19 never left

By Kelly Gardner

Do I really need a flu shot *and* a COVID-19 booster? Yes, and you can get them at the same time.

Yellowstone County's first case of influenza this season was confirmed last week. Flu also has been diagnosed recently in Flathead County. The specific flu strains identified in those two Montana cases are in this season's flu vaccines, so the vaccine should offer good protection against them.

In 2020, there were *zero* cases reported of influenza in Yellowstone County, thanks to efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 (limited social interaction, widespread masking, improved hand hygiene, etc.). Unfortunately, as we returned to "normal" life in 2021, flu once again circulated, matching pre-COVID-19 case numbers in Yellowstone County.

Australia's warning

Infectious disease experts in the U.S. historically have watched influenza activity in the Southern Hemisphere (Australia and New Zealand) for indications of what the upcoming flu season will be like. This year, the outlook is bleak. Australia has had its worst flu season in five years. While this isn't a perfect predictor, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is on high alert for a very aggressive flu season in the United States. That, coupled with another COVID-19 surge, could mean severe illness or death for thousands of people.

The U.S. isn't currently in a COVID-19 surge, yet community spread remains high in 85% of counties in the nation – thanks to the highly contagious Omicron variant.

Fortunately, the new Pfizer and Moderna boosters were created with that in mind and will help to restore protection that has faded since previous vaccination. These recently authorized boosters help provide broader protection against more variants.

 In 2020 and 2021, COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death in the United States, behind heart disease and cancer. Studies have shown that getting boosters into arms early this fall would prevent an estimated 12% to 15% of deaths over a nine-month period.

The best way to prevent becoming seriously ill from the flu and COVID-19 is to get vaccinated. Vaccines can't provide 100% immunity, but do significantly reduce the odds of becoming seriously ill or hospitalized as well as lowering the risk of spreading illness to others.

2022-2023 flu shots

This year's flu vaccines protect against four strains of flu: influenza A (H1N1), influenza A (H3N2), and two influenza B viruses. Flu vaccines have been around since the 1940s, and have been shown to be very safe. Common side effects from a flu shot include soreness, redness, and/or swelling where the shot was given, headache, low-grade fever, nausea, muscle aches, and fatigue – these are signs that your

immune system is responding to the vaccine, which is exactly what it should do. Life-threatening allergic reactions to flu shots are very rare.

The new COVID-19 boosters are "bivalent," which means that they are half the original COVID-19 strain, and half Omicron BA.4 and BA.5. Pfizer's bivalent booster is authorized for those 12 or older, while Moderna's authorization is for people 18 and up.

People must complete a primary COVID-19 vaccine series before getting the booster. The recommendation is that people should wait at least two months from their last COVID-19 vaccine dose before getting a bivalent booster.

The flu shot and COVID-19 boosters are now available at most clinics and pharmacies, and may be offered at low or no cost. Community members may call the RiverStone Health Immunizations Clinic at 406-247-3382 to make an appointment to get these vaccines. RiverStone Health Clinic patients can make appointments for flu and COVID-19 vaccinations at our primary care clinics in Billings, Bridger, Joliet and Worden.

Kelly Gardner, RN, is the RiverStone Health communicable disease program manager.