

64% of children vaccinated against flu last season; deaths hit record

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Roughly 64% of children and 48% of adults were vaccinated against flu last season, according to a new report.

While vaccination rates improved for both groups, they still fell short of national goals. Health officials on Thursday said vaccination for everyone 6 months and older is even more important this season as both flu and COVID-19 circulate.

Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stressed that flu is a serious disease.

“You superimpose that upon the challenge we will inevitably face with COVID as we get into the fall and winter and go more indoors, which will be challenging for the prevention of a respiratory infection. So let’s do what we can with the tools we have, and we have a good tool with the influenza vaccine,” he said during a National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) press conference.

The pediatric vaccination rate of 63.8% was up 1.2 points over the previous season, according to a [new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#). About 75.5% of children ages 6 months to 4 years were vaccinated, the only pediatric age group to show significant improvement. Rates were 64.6% for children ages 5-12 years and 53.3% for teenagers.

Rates were lowest for Black children at 58%. People who are Black or Hispanic also have been hit particularly hard by COVID-19.

“We know that there are multiple barriers at play here in communities of color, including but certainly not limited to unconscious bias, institutional racism, distrust of the health care system and vaccine hesitance,” said NFID President Patricia N. Whitley-Williams, M.D., FAAP. “Despite these hurdles, we cannot become complacent in our attempts to drive change. Now is the time for change. Now is the time for everyone to get a flu vaccine.”

However, a [new study in *Pediatrics*](#) looking at survey data from more than 2,000 parents of children ages 6 months to 5 years found the pandemic may not be enough to convince families of any race to vaccinate their children against influenza. Among those who did not vaccinate their children last season, 34% said pandemic made them less likely to vaccinate this year compared to what they planned to do before the

pandemic, and 21% were more likely to vaccinate. Among those who vaccinated their children last season, 24% said the pandemic made them less likely to vaccinate this year, while 39% said it made them more likely to vaccinate.

This season follows one that was especially difficult for children, due in part to an early surge of influenza B. Dr. Whitley-Williams said the CDC recently received a report of an additional child who died during the 2019-'20 season, bringing the number of pediatric flu deaths to 189, a new record for a regular flu season.

Hospitalization rates for children 4 and under were at a record high last season, even surpassing the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, and rates for children ages 5-17 were higher than any recent regular season.

Across all ages, **the CDC estimates** there were 38 million flu illnesses during the 2019-'20 season, 400,000 flu hospitalizations and 22,000 flu-associated deaths.

While there have been reports of an especially mild season in the Southern Hemisphere, officials warned they can't be sure the same will be true in the U.S., and it will be important not to overwhelm hospital resources. Roughly 198 million doses of flu vaccine are expected to be available. The CDC said some shortages have been reported, but there have not been any national supply issues.

Flu vaccine not only protects those who receive it but also those around them. Also, if those who are vaccinated do get sick, their illness is likely to be milder.

In addition to vaccination, Dr. Fauci said people can take additional steps that will help protect them against both flu and COVID-19. He recommended wearing face coverings in public, keeping physical distance between people, avoiding crowds, washing hands regularly, avoid touching your face, disinfecting surfaces regularly, staying home when you are sick and taking antivirals if you have the flu.

"Flu continues to be a public health crisis for children of all ages and their families," Dr. Whitley-Williams said. "Fortunately, it is a vaccine-preventable disease and the more people who are vaccinated, the more people who are protected."

Resources

- [AAP policy "Recommendations for Prevention and Control of Influenza in Children, 2020–2021"](#)
- [AAP resources to help pediatricians prepare for flu season during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [Information from the CDC about flu](#)
- [CDC's VaccineFinder website](#)
- [Information for parents on flu vaccine from HealthyChildren.org](#)
- [AAP News stories on flu](#)
- [Information on flu from the AAP Red Book](#)