

# ACT ON THE FACTS

## Flu Immunizations

Every year, some 30 million people become sick with influenza (flu) and nearly half require a visit with a health care provider. Although vaccination against the flu remains the most effective way to protect people from contracting the virus, only about half of U.S. adults receive it each year.<sup>1</sup>

This year, as the country battles the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of the flu vaccination has increased dramatically. Current knowledge

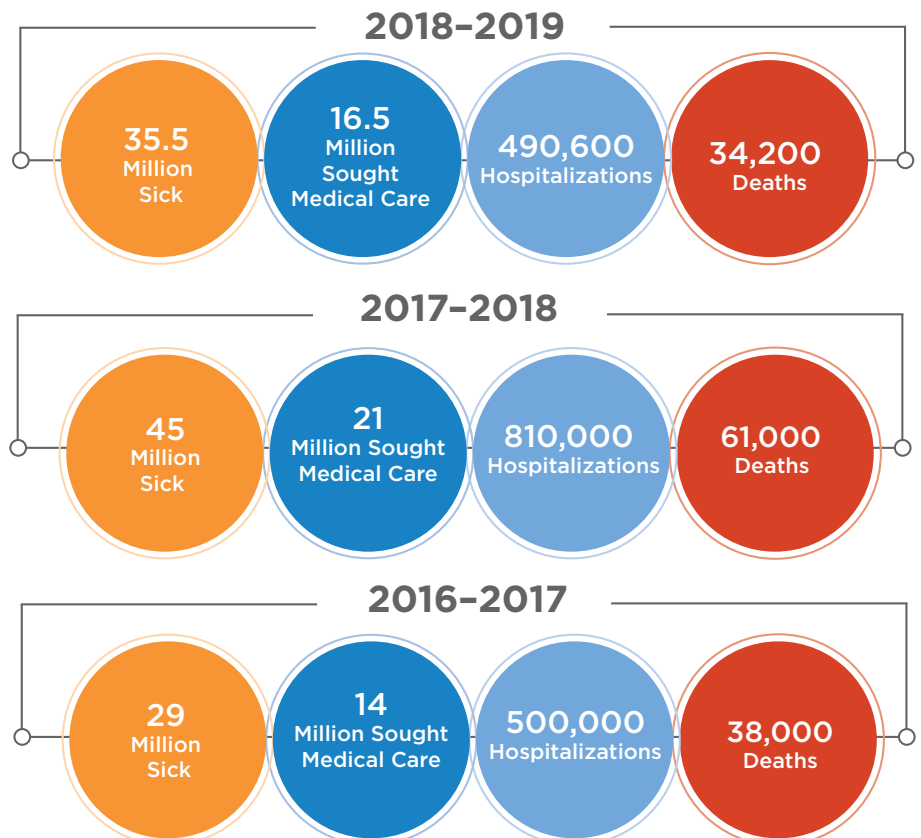
not only suggests that it is possible to contract both the flu and COVID-19 at the same time, but also that having either increases susceptibility to other respiratory illnesses.<sup>2,3</sup> Most importantly, the simultaneous presence of flu and COVID-19 threatens to overwhelm the health care system.

Below, we provide an overview of the flu in past years and suggest steps an employer can take to control its spread and promote vaccination.

### FLU'S TOLL ON OUR HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The annual toll of the flu is profound. It is estimated that 35 million Americans became sick from the flu and more than 34,000 died from it in 2018-2019. The flu season previous to that was significantly worse: 45 million people became sick and 61,000 died (see image).

**FIGURE 1. FLU SEASONS 2016-2019<sup>1</sup>**



## THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYERS

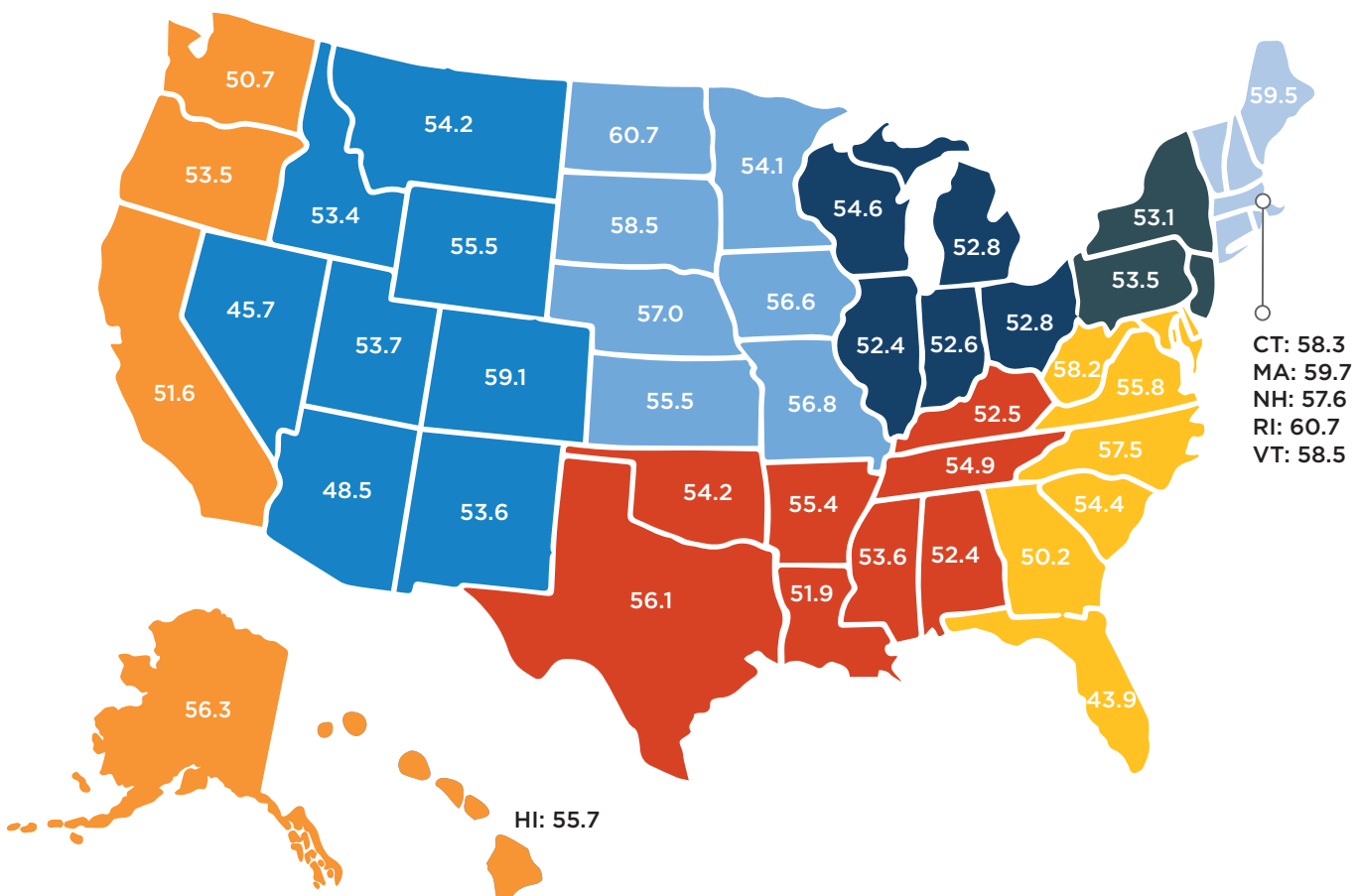
Flu costs an estimated \$11.2 billion annually in direct and indirect costs. Direct medical costs, based on outpatient visits, emergency department (ED) visits and hospitalizations, are estimated at \$3.2 billion. Adults diagnosed with the flu also lose an average of 3.7–5.9 days of work, amounting to \$8 billion in indirect costs.<sup>4,5</sup>

Flu vaccination is the most effective way to protect employees from becoming sick from the virus. On average, vaccination is 40%–60% effective against contracting influenza. Even among those who are vaccinated and become sick, it can reduce symptoms and shorten recovery time.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, according to the Healthcare Effectiveness Data Information Set (HEDIS<sup>®7</sup>), only an average of 52% of commercially insured adults received the flu shot in 2018–2019, a number that has not increased much over the last 10 years.<sup>8</sup>

Data also show that rates vary significantly by state. Florida, with its high number of seniors over 65 who are more susceptible to the flu and COVID-19, had the lowest vaccination rates (43.9%). North Dakota and Rhode Island had the highest vaccination rates: 60.7% of adults were vaccinated.<sup>9</sup>

CDC data also indicate racial variations. Of all races, non-Hispanic White adults had the highest flu vaccination rates, followed by Asian adults; Hispanic adults had the lowest rates.<sup>10</sup>

**FIGURE 2. FLU VACCINATION RATES<sup>9</sup>**



HEDIS is the most widely used health care quality measurement tool in the United States and is designed to help employers understand the quality of health care provided to their employees and dependents.

## WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

In light of COVID-19, employers are encouraged to make a rigorous effort to encourage flu vaccination among their employees. Reducing flu risk not only improves the health and productivity of employees, it protects already scarce health care resources from being used for an illness that is largely preventable.

Employers are encouraged to consider each of the following points as we enter the 2020 flu season:



### 1. Educate:

- Encourage all employees to receive the flu vaccine and educate them about its increased importance in light of COVID-19.
- Provide information on employer-sponsored coverage for the flu vaccine.



### 2. Vaccinate:

- When possible, offer flu vaccines at the worksite to decrease adoption barriers. Flu clinics also improve convenience and decrease employees' time away from work.
- When onsite vaccine clinics are not possible, provide employees with information about where they can receive flu vaccinations in their local community and the service providers that accept their insurance, including grocery stores, drug stores, walk-in clinics and other settings.



### 3. Protect:

- Make wearing a mask mandatory.
- Remind employees to stay at least six feet apart if possible, understanding that this may not be enough if someone is sneezing, coughing, yelling, singing or whistling.
- Adopt a routine for disinfecting frequently touched surfaces.
- Promote telework or similar policies when an employee is sick or must take care of a sick family member.
- Send employees home if they have symptoms. Discourage employees from coming to work when sick.
- Ensure that sick employees remain home for 24 hours after their fever has subsided (without fever-reducing medicines).
- Encourage frequent hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Hand sanitizer may also be encouraged, although it is important to note it is not as effective as soap and water. Ensure that both options are readily available.
- Remind employees to cough and sneeze into a tissue or, if a tissue is not available, into their elbow.

## SOURCES:

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