



**COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO HEALTH AGENCY
PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Flu Season is Here: When Should You Go to the Emergency Room?

In most cases, it's best to rest and recover at home

San Luis Obispo — The County of San Luis Obispo Public Health Department encourages residents to think twice before seeking emergency medical treatment for the flu. In most cases of the flu, it's most effective and most comfortable to recover on your own at home. This guidance is based on several key factors:

Emergency medical services—including emergency rooms and ambulances—are nearing capacity across SLO County. These emergency resources are here for people who are very sick or injured and need immediate treatment for potentially life-threatening conditions. Using emergency resources to seek treatment for regular cases of flu detracts from our community's ability to provide critical medical care to those who need it most.

Otherwise healthy patients are likely to encounter long waits as severely ill and injured patients are seen first. You probably don't want to spend hours in the waiting room to see the doctor only to be told in most cases to rest, hydrate and take fever-relieving medication. Arriving at the hospital by ambulance does not change this.

Visits to the hospital may expose patients and family to other contagious illnesses. By visiting the hospital, you will likely encounter different strains of the flu and other illnesses. This increases your risk of becoming even sicker. It also exposes those who accompany you to these additional illnesses.

Some people are especially at risk for serious complications from the flu. These people should be especially alert and seek specific treatment against the flu virus from their regular doctor's office, or, if a primary care provider is not available, an urgent care center. These groups of people include:

- Children younger than 2 years
- Adults aged 65 years and older
- People with chronic lung, heart, kidney, liver, blood, and metabolic disorders or neurologic and neurodevelopment conditions
- People with immunosuppression, caused by medications or by HIV infection
- Women who are pregnant or postpartum (within 2 weeks after delivery)
- People younger than 19 years who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy
- People of American Indian/Alaska Native descent
- People with extreme obesity (i.e., body-mass index is equal to or greater than 40)
- Residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities

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Flu can be dangerous and even healthy people can sometimes experience serious complications. If you experience any of these symptoms when you have the flu, seek medical attention immediately:

- Difficulty breathing (more than regular congestion)
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain or severe abdominal pain
- Confusion
- Sudden dizziness
- Severe vomiting or vomiting that won't stop

What if you are still concerned? If you do not experience these symptoms and are not in these high-risk groups but are concerned about flu-like symptoms, call your regular healthcare provider. If you do not have a regular healthcare provider, call or visit your local urgent care center.

Keep reading for additional FAQs regarding the flu in San Luis Obispo County.

I've heard this is going to be a bad year for the flu. Is that true in SLO County?

Yes. Across SLO County, we're seeing more confirmed cases of the flu than usual, and more people are visiting the emergency room because of the flu (Flu is not a reportable illness, so the Public Health Department does not track exact numbers of cases.) Early reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are that even those who received the flu vaccine this season may not be having the normal level of effectiveness in protection against flu. In reality, however, every year is a bad flu year for the people who get sick. And health officials believe the local flu season may not yet have peaked. This makes it especially important to take steps to protect yourself and those around you.

What can I do to protect myself?

- **Wash your hands.** Wash your hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds. (Need a timer? Sing the "happy birthday" song twice.) If soap and water aren't available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.** This helps prevent the spread of the virus.
- **Avoid contact with people who are sick.** This might mean you need to delay a visit, or meet by phone or video chat instead.
- **Get the flu shot.** While the flu shot offers most protection if you get it early in the season, it's better now than never. If you get a flu vaccine but still get the flu, you will most likely have more mild illness and less risk of serious complications. You can get your flu shot from your healthcare provider, at many local pharmacies, or at [Public Health Department clinics](#).

What should I do if I have the flu?

- **Stay home.** If you get sick with flu symptoms, in most cases, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people as much as possible. Rest, stay hydrated, and take temperature-reducing medicines (such as Tylenol or ibuprofen) as needed.
- **Keep it to yourself.** Don't share the flu. Wash your hands often and use a tissue to cover your cough or sneeze. Avoid spending time with other people, especially those who are at risk for serious complications of the flu. This may mean you need to delay a visit or a meeting.
- **Look out for signs that it may be more serious.** In most cases, you do not need medical care or prescription medicine to recover from the flu. However, some cases can be more serious. See the symptoms described above for signs that you may need to see a healthcare provider.

Should I take Tamiflu or other antiviral medicine? What about antibiotics?

Your doctor may prescribe an antiviral medicine such as Tamiflu to help reduce symptoms of the flu, especially if you are at risk of serious complications. If your doctor prescribes antiviral medicine, be sure to take it as directed.

If you are generally healthy (except for the flu), your doctor may not prescribe this medicine. Most of the time, people who are generally healthy do not need to take antiviral medicine for the flu.

If you or someone you know is taking Tamiflu, it's important to follow all regular precautions to avoid catching or spreading the flu. Research does not consistently show that it can reduce the risk of giving the flu to others.

Antibiotics are not effective against the flu. Taking antibiotics when you don't need them can expose you to unwanted side effects and can contribute to antibiotic resistance, making the drugs less effective when we do need them.

How long is someone contagious after getting the flu?

A person may be considered no longer contagious after:

- At least seven days past the start date of their illness.
- 24 hours with no fever, and no use of fever-reducing medicine (such as Tylenol or ibuprofen)

That means if you have been sick with the flu for more than seven days and still have a fever, you can still spread the virus to others. (Some people, especially children, may spread the virus for more than seven days.) You need to meet both conditions to be no longer contagious.

People often cough for a period of time after recovering from the flu because of the damage it causes to lungs and airways. That cough does not necessarily mean the person is still contagious.

I already had the flu. Should I get the flu shot?

Yes. The flu vaccine protects against three to four strains of the flu. If you've had one strain, you are still susceptible to the other strains. Get your flu shot!

Where can I learn more?

Visit www.cdc.gov/flu.

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