

Is Oregon's 'unprecedented' flu vacation over?

Hospitalizations due to flu this year are just a fraction of normal

By **AMELIA TEMPLETON**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — For two years, Oregon had some of the most stringent masking and social distancing rules in the country.

COVID-19 was the target; the influenza virus was staved off too.

Oregon has had no discernible flu season since the pandemic began.

There have been just nine hospitalizations due to the flu in the Portland metro area so far this year, compared to 600 or so in a typical year.

Dr. Paul Cieslak, medical director for communicable diseases and immunizations at Oregon Health Authority, says it's the first time in his 30-year career the state has had an extended vacation from the flu.



The Observer, File

This spring, Oregon state public health officials are reporting an increase in the percent of positive flu tests for the fourth week in a row.

"This is really unprecedented, at least in my public health lifetime," he said.

But there are now signs the vacation is over. Oregon, Washington and California lifted their mask mandates earlier this month, and in Oregon state public health officials are reporting an increase in the percent of posi-

tive flu tests for the fourth week in a row.

During the week of March 6-12, 3.1% of influenza tests were positive, up nearly five times higher from a month earlier at 0.6%.

It's unusual: Flu season in Oregon typically peaks in January or February.

It is possible that with masks

off, a full-blown flu season could develop in Oregon in the next few months.

Not only are masks no longer required, but fewer people than normal — less than half the population — have gotten their flu shot this year.

The CDC recommends a flu shot for everyone 6 months and older.

Cieslak says most people are not going to die when they get the flu, but it is worth getting vaccinated to avoid several days of misery: headaches, body aches and missed work or school.

The shot is available at most pharmacies, and there are a variety of options people can try.

Dislike needles? The vaccine is available as a nasal spray for people ages 2-49 who aren't pregnant.

People 65 and over can request a version with a stronger dose — more likely to cause arm pain, but also more protective against the virus.

If vaccines don't beat back the surge, the changing seasons likely

will. In Oregon, flu season typically ends by May.

Cieslak says there are theories, but nobody knows for sure why the virus spreads during the winter in the northern hemisphere and summer in the southern hemisphere.

It could be, he says, that it surges when people spend more time together, cheek to jowl, indoors. Or, it survives better when the humidity in the air is low.

The early warning signs for flu season are harder to interpret than the COVID data people have become accustomed to following. Flu is so widespread that individual cases aren't reported to the state or the CDC. Instead, OHA tracks spread by looking at the percent of laboratory tests for influenza that are positive, and the number of flu-related hospitalizations in the tri-county Portland metro area.

"Maybe we'll be saved by the calendar," Cieslak said. "But flu always surprises me, so I don't bet on anything. I got my vaccine."

Oregonians support Black Lives Matter movement

By **COURTNEY VAUGHN**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — A majority of Oregonians polled say they support the Black Lives Matter movement, but residents are split on whether society is in a better place because of it.

Results of an Oregon Values and Beliefs Center survey conducted in February show about six in 10 Oregon residents polled (59%) support the Black Lives Matter movement. Among them, 36% showed strong support. Three in 10 said they oppose the movement and about one in 10, or 9%, were unsure.

According to the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, support for the movement is higher among those with more education and income, with support being highest among Multnomah County residents.

Still, surveyors noted a lingering political divide among Oregonians on the perceptions of the social justice movement, with 87% of Democrats in support and 69% of Republicans opposed.

In 2020, the deaths of three Black individuals — two at the hands of police — catapulted the social justice movement into prominence. In February 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was murdered by three white men in Georgia who mistook him for a burglar while he jogged. The following month, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old EMT, was shot and killed by police in Kentucky while sleeping in her home. In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, a former Minneapolis police officer who knelt on Floyd's neck until he died, catalyzed the public into action. The

high-profile cases forced a spotlight on policing, racism and implicit bias in America, sparking nationwide protests and marches.

While Black Lives Matter marches and demonstrations took place in major cities, Portland saw sustained protests in 2020 that garnered international media attention and defined the city for much of that time. Downtown Portland saw sometimes violent clashes between protesters and local and federal police. Police drew scrutiny from the public and lawmakers for their repeated use of tear gas, pepper spray and munitions that left one man with a fractured skull.

Antifascist protesters drew strong criticism for demonstrations that ended in repeated damage to downtown businesses. Some Oregonians say that drowned out

MORE INFORMATION

The Oregon Values and Beliefs Center is committed to the highest level of public opinion research. To help obtain that, the nonprofit is building a large research panel of Oregonians to ensure that all voices are represented in discussions of public policy in a valid and statistically reliable way. Selected panelists earn points for their participation, which can be redeemed for cash or donated to a charity. To learn more visit oregonvbc.org/about-the-panel.

the overall message and overshadowed the need for police reform.

Robert Williams, who lives in Multnomah County, told the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center that the ongoing protests may have hurt the message.

"Getting awareness of the issue is necessary. I believe the extended violence that accompanied actions was instigated by non-BLM agency," Williams said.

While a majority of those polled support Black Lives Matter, Oregonians are torn

on the social impact of the justice movement.

OVBC polling shows 36% of Oregon residents think society is in a better place as a result of the social justice movement that followed Floyd's death. Survey results show 38% think the country is worse off and 19% of those polled said we're in the same place as before Floyd's death and the ensuing calls for reform.

"I think that BLM educated so many white Americans, resulting in (two) major impacts," Susan Heath of

the Willamette Valley said. "Some whites responded with compassion and concern (and may or may not still be involved in the movement), while others responded with fear and bigotry and joined the white nationalist backlash."

Pollsters note a significant age gap in response to the question of societal impacts. Oregonians ages 75 and older are much more likely (48% versus 28%) than those ages 18-29 to think our culture is in a better place.

"Overall, Republicans tend to be more pessimistic on the issue, with 69% saying our culture is in a worse place, whereas 58% of Democrats think we're better off," OVBC noted in a summary of results, saying optimism on the issue tends to increase with higher income and education levels.

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