State of Alaska Epidemiology Bulletin

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Influenza Immunizations — Alaska, August 1 through July 31, 2018–2021

Background

Influenza vaccination is recommended for persons aged 6 months and older every year to prevent influenza (flu) cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.[1] It is especially important to get a flu vaccine during the COVID pandemic to help prevent simultaneous spikes of flu and COVID-19 cases and to preserve Alaska's health care resources. It is also possible to have flu and other respiratory illnesses like COVID-19 at the same time. All immunizations administered in Alaska must be reported to VacTrAK, the Alaska Immunization Program's Immunization Information System.[2] The purpose of this *Bulletin* is to utilize VacTrAK data to evaluate the number of flu vaccines administered in the 2020–21 flu season compared to the 2018–19 and 2019–20 flu seasons.

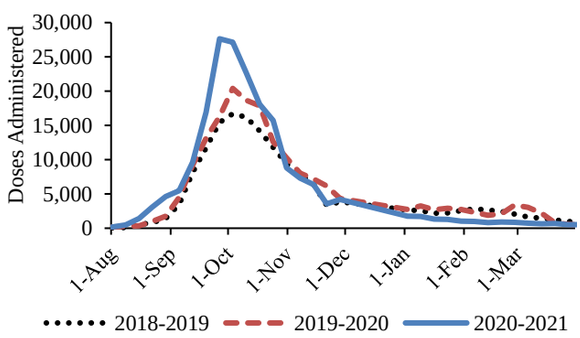
Methods

Flu vaccines administered in Alaska were extracted from VacTrAK for all ages on a weekly basis starting August 1 of each season and ending July 31 of each season. Because the specific flu vaccines vary from year to year, all flu vaccines available in VacTrAK were used for data collection. While each vaccine dose administered is required to be reported into VacTrAK, there is not an exact 1:1 dose-to-person correlation for the flu vaccine because children aged <10 years may receive two flu doses if it was their first season being vaccinated.[3]

Results

During the entire 2020–21 flu season, 3.8% more doses of influenza vaccine were administered compared to the prior 2019–20 flu season (Figure 1). During August 1 through November 27 of the 2020–21 influenza season, there was a 20% increase in administered influenza vaccine doses compared to the two previous flu seasons (Figure 2). Subsequently, the number of doses of influenza vaccination administered after November 27 dipped below the number of administered influenza vaccine doses from two previous flu seasons.

Figure 1. Flu Vaccines Administered Weekly — Alaska, August 1 through March 31, 2018–2021



Discussion

More Alaskans were motivated to get their flu shots earlier in the 2020–21 flu season than in the previous two flu seasons. Increased messaging from public health officials and clinicians on the importance of flu vaccines to prevent simultaneous epidemics of influenza and COVID-19 likely contributed to the 20% increase in flu vaccine prior to November 27 in 2020 compared to 2019 (Figure 2). Notably, each age category showed an increase in flu vaccine uptake, except for children aged 6 months through 10 years.

By the end of the 2020–21 flu season, the overall influenza vaccination rate was only 3.8% higher than the 2019–20 flu season. As was seen in the previous two flu seasons, flu vaccination counts peaked in early October. Different from the previous two seasons, community flu vaccination events largely ceased in November 2020, which might have contributed to the comparatively lower vaccine uptake during that month.

The seasonal burden of flu cases depends on several factors, such as the degree to which circulating flu strains match the flu strains in the vaccine, community vaccination coverage levels, and implementation of nonpharmaceutical interventions. The 2020–21 flu season was exceedingly mild in Alaska, likely due to community mitigation efforts such as masking and social distancing, as well as increased vaccination.[4] It's difficult to predict what the 2021–22 flu season will bring. As such, it is important for Alaskans to get both the flu and COVID-19 vaccinations to prevent associated illness, hospitalizations, and deaths, and to reduce the burden on our medical system.

Recommendations

1. All eligible persons aged 6 months and older should get a flu vaccine annually by the end of October.[5]
2. Inform patients that the flu vaccine does not protect them against infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
3. The COVID-19 and flu vaccines may be administered at the same time.[6]

References

1. CDC. Who Needs a Flu Vaccine and When. Available at: https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/vaccinations.htm
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3. CDC. Flu and Young Children. Available at: https://www.cdc.gov/flu/highrisk/children.htm#types
4. Alaska Section of Epidemiology. *Bulletin*. "Alaska Influenza Surveillance Summary, 2020-21 Season." No. 16, September 21, 2021. Available at: http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2021_16.pdf
5. Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. Influenza. Available at: flu.alaska.gov
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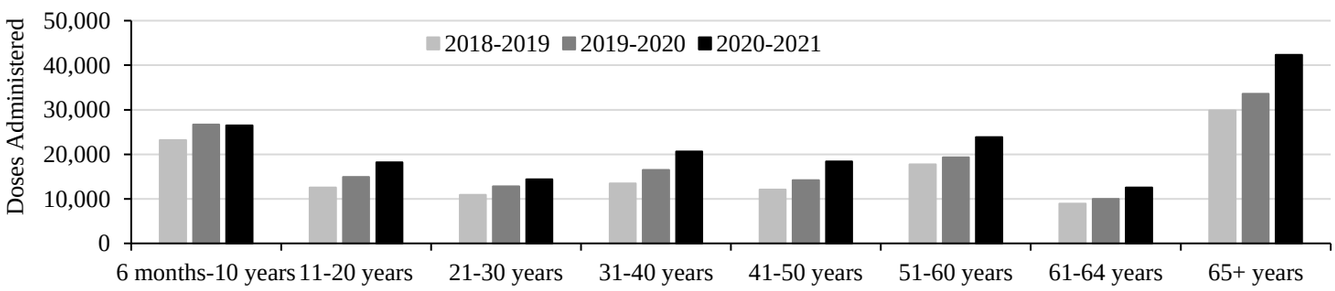
Figure 2. Influenza Vaccines Administered, by Age — Alaska, August 1 through November 27, 2018–2020



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