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Tackling the Tripledemic: A Look at Combatting COVID-19, RSV, & the Flu

Dr. Caudle:

Respiratory illnesses, such as COVID-19, the flu and respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV for short, are on the rise leading to overwhelmed pediatric units and clinicians. So, what might be causing these sudden increases?

Welcome to *COVID-19: On The Frontlines* on ReachMD. I'm your host, Dr. Jennifer Caudle. And here with us to discuss why rates of respiratory illness may be growing in pediatric patients is fellow ReachMD host Dr. Jennifer Shu. Did Shu is a pediatrician at Children's Medical Group in Atlanta, Georgia.

Dr. Shu, welcome to the program.

Dr. Shu:

Thank you so much for having me, Dr. Caudle.

Dr. Caudle:

Well, I'm excited that you're here. This is a very important topic. So, to start us off, Dr. Shu, can you give us a sense of how much rates have risen for some of the respiratory illnesses?

Dr. Shu:

Yeah. So I think this might have taken us a little bit by surprise, but starting in about September, after Labor Day, our rates of respiratory illnesses that we've been seeing in our offices and in the hospitals has really increased quickly, and some estimates show that we are at levels that we typically don't see until later in the season, such as December-ish. And we're starting to see much higher numbers earlier than we normally expect.

Dr. Caudle:

Right. Right. No, I definitely agree with you. I do think this has taken a lot of us by surprise. You know, what do you think has led to this rise? You know, do you think quarantining during the COVID-19 pandemic had a role in this?

Dr. Shu:

It is possible that after being separated for a long time our immune systems have changed and we're not used to seeing some of these common respiratory viruses, but still I think that it's not typical to see these illnesses so early. What we did find during pandemic is that when COVID was high, all of these other respiratory viruses were low, and then as COVID kind of decreased a little bit, some of the respiratory viruses came back during the summer rather than in the winter. So we were seeing, you know, little pockets of flu and RSV all summer long when that's not usually what we tend to see or what we used to see pre-pandemic.

Dr. Caudle:

Mm-hmm. No, of course. For those of you who are just tuning in, you're listening to *COVID-19: On The Frontlines* on ReachMD. I'm your host, Dr. Jennifer Caudle, and I'm speaking with fellow ReachMD host Dr. Jennifer Shu about the rising rates of COVID-19, the flu and RSV in pediatric patients.

So, Dr. Shu, let's turn our attention to vaccination. You know, are rates of vaccination coinciding with this rising number of COVID-19, flu, and RSV infections in our pediatric patients?

Dr. Shu:

You know, that's an excellent question. We do have vaccines now for COVID and flu starting ages six months and up, so that is now

available to all people of those ages. The uptake has been variable for those ages. And what's important to remember is that the vaccines don't necessarily prevent you from getting these viruses completely, but if you do get the viruses, the illness tends to be less severe. And so, yes, there probably is some role with the vaccines and the rates, but they're not going to be foolproof in preventing these illnesses from happening.

And as far as RSV goes, right now, there's not a vaccine against RSV. There are some in the works, both for children and also possibly for pregnant women to, you know, to get that protection started sooner rather than later. For premature infants, especially those with certain heart or lung conditions, there may be an option for them to get monoclonal antibody during the typical RSV season to prevent them from getting infected. And so, I definitely encourage my patients who are eligible to get that treatment.

Dr. Caudle:

Hmm. Excellent. And, you know, now let's look at how we can apply these insights to clinical practice. You know, you talked a little bit about that already, but what can clinicians do to help combat this sort of triple-demic of COVID, flu and RSV?

Dr. Shu:

Yeah. So now that we've gone through the pandemic for over two years now, I think our patients are really savvy, and they know how to better prepare themselves against respiratory illnesses, so all these that you've mentioned. We really can try to prevent droplets from spreading, whether that's by good handwashing, covering our coughs and sneezes. And for children two and up and adults, masking can be very protective both from spreading the illness if you're sick as well as from preventing getting sick, if you're around somebody with illness. So I do encourage people to follow your common sense. If you're sick, don't go to school or to work, and if you have to get out and about, then try to wear a mask, and practice good hand hygiene as well.

Dr. Caudle:

Those are excellent points. And, you know, before we close, Dr. Shu, do you have any final thoughts or takeaways you'd like to share with our audience today?

Dr. Shu:

Just as a reminder for all of our clinicians and patients, there are other respiratory illnesses besides the triple-demic of COVID, flu, and RSV, and if a patient can be fully vaccinated against all those preventable illnesses, such as pneumococcal disease, for example, diphtheria, pertussis, Haemophilus influenzae, definitely stay up-to-date on all the vaccines we do have available, and that also includes COVID and influenza. And that can mean that if you get infected, your infection is less likely to be severe, and if you get infected with multiple things, which is a distinct possibility, we hope that your infection will be less severe also.

Dr. Caudle:

Excellent. Well, with these insights in mind, I'd like to thank my guest and fellow ReachMD host, Dr. Jennifer Shu, for sharing her perspective on rising rates of respiratory illnesses.

Dr. Shu, it was a pleasure speaking with you today.

Dr. Shu:

Thank you so much for having me, Dr. Caudle. It's always a pleasure.

Dr. Caudle:

Well, thank you for being here. I'm your host, Dr. Jennifer Caudle, and to access this and other episodes in our series, visit ReachMD.com/COVID-19 where you can be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening.