

Flu Season Is Upon Us: Experts Weigh In On Staying Safe

Ambrose Clancy | 1/13/26

So far, so good.

That's the reaction for those who work with the youngest and oldest on Shelter Island, monitoring a record-breaking flu season. Shelter Island School Nurse Mary Kanarvogel and Senior Center Director Kelly Brochu said they had not noticed any large upticks in flu cases.

The Island might be dodging a bullet. The New York State Department of Health (NYDH) recorded 71,123 confirmed flu cases across the state for the week ending before Christmas, the highest number since 2004. NYDH noted that was 38% higher than the previous week. Suffolk County had 7,571 people with flu for the week ending Dec. 20, and Long Island, according to State statistics, had the highest rates after New York City.

"I honestly thought that the return from Christmas break we'd be met with the flu and other common winter upper respiratory infections," Ms. Kanarvogel said. "But we weren't."

She added that she found no evidence that the flu or flu-like illnesses have reached the school population, seeing no rise in absences with either students or staff.

"I haven't had to send any students home with flu-like symptoms since our return to classes," the nurse said. "I'm sure hoping that I'm not jinxing myself by saying all this, but all is well here at the moment."

Ms. Brochu also reported good news. "I feel we've been pretty lucky so far with our seniors not getting or reporting the flu to us," the Senior Center director said. "Our gatherings have been about the same. We've heard of others on the Island being sick, but our seniors have been pretty healthy — knock on wood."

Ms. Brochu noted that the Center had a big turnout for its vaccination clinic in October. "We've been encouraging hand washing and educating proper covering of the mouth when coughing," she added.

Patrica McCardle, R.N., the infection preventionist at Greenport's Stony Brook Eastern Long Island Hospital said "we've seen our share of flu patients" and cited New York State, Long

Island and national statistics about the flu raging through communities. “But there’s been good news,” Nurse McCardle said, noting a recent drop of 43% in cases in the past week at the hospital.

She stressed the importance of getting vaccinated against the illnesses. The optimum time for vaccines is before the flu season kicks into high gear during the colder months, but any time is a good time to get vaccinated.

Stony Brook Southampton Hospital has more admitted flu cases, versus the same period in the prior year. In the first week of 2025 there were 11 patients admitted to the hospital suffering from the flu: in the first week of 2026 there were 19, according to statistics from the hospital.

Like her colleague at Eastern Long Island Hospital, Melody Butler, R.N., the director of Infection Prevention & Control at Stony Brook Southampton, said if you haven’t had a flu shot, it’s never too late, even if you’ve recently caught the virus.

“Your illness could be caused by one of the four strains covered, leaving you unprotected against the other three strains, if you’re not vaccinated,” Nurse Butler said. “Vaccination is recommended throughout the entire flu season, which can last as late as May, as long as viruses are circulating in the community. While early fall is ideal, a late dose can still help provide protection against serious illness and hospitalization.”

She pointed to the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control’s guidelines for staying safe during flu season:

- For the 2025–2026 season, CDC advises single-dose, thimerosal-free vaccines for children, adults, and pregnant women.
- High-dose vaccines can be especially effective for adults 60-plus.

Everyday Hygiene

- Wash your hands often with soap and water; use alcohol based sanitizers if soap isn’t available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth, where viruses easily enter.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your elbow.
- Clean high-touch surfaces regularly to reduce viral contamination.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you feel sick, stay home until symptoms improve and you’ve been fever-free for 24 hours without medication.

Consider Masking When Needed

- Wearing a mask can help protect you from inhaling infectious droplets and helps others if you’re sick.