

Has flu season reached its height?

NEW YORK (AP) — Flu is now widespread in every state except Hawaii, but the good news is the season appears to already be peaking.

It's been a rough few weeks: Hospitals have set up tents to handle patient overflow. Doctors are putting in double and triple shifts. Ambulances have been sidelined while paramedics waited to drop off patients.

"This morning, I couldn't stand up. I was really weak," said Margaret Shafer, who went to a Seattle emergency room this week after a bout with the flu was followed by pneumonia.

But an update out Friday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows patient traffic for flu is no longer skyrocketing the way it was in December.

"It looks like it's starting to level out," said the CDC's Lynnette Brammer, who oversees flu tracking.

Still, flu is unpredictable. "I don't know where it will end up," she added.

Many flu seasons don't really get going until around Christmas, and don't crescendo until February. That's how last year's flu season played out. This season got off to an early start and cases surged over the holidays.

Patients who went to the ER at Palomar Medical Center Escondido, north of San Diego, then had to wait as long as nine hours. The hospital this week took down a tent it used to handle the overflow but is still seeing a lot of patients with fevers, aches, chills and other flu symptoms.

"We're having to treat people in hallways, in chairs, wherever we have space," said Michelle Gunnett, the director of emergency services.

There's a tent in place at Kaweah Delta Medical Center in the Central California city of Visalia, where doctors this week have been pulling double and triple shifts to keep up.

"It's like a MASH unit," said Dr. Ed Hirsch, the hospital's chief medical officer.

In Chicago, paramedics have been forced to wait at ERs with patients for as long as two hours for an open spot. That means the ambulances can't be used for other calls, said Larry Langford, a spokesman for the city's fire department.

What had some people worried about this U.S. flu season was the bad season last year in Australia. That country was hit hard by a flu bug that's notorious for causing severe illness, and flu viruses spread around the world. Preliminary estimates suggested the vaccine barely worked there, and the U.S. was again facing the same H3N2 virus with the same flu shot.

That virus caused one of the worst U.S. flu seasons in recent years, 2014-15, when the vaccine was a poor match. It was back last winter but the vaccine was a better fit.

Health officials say this year's shot targets the strains that are making Americans sick, primarily H3N2. How well it is working won't be known until next month but it's expected to be better than the 10 percent Australia reported.

The report out Friday showed flu and pneumonia deaths crept up last week to push flu to an epidemic level. Flu reaches that threshold most winters, even during seasons that are not considered particularly bad.

Hospitalizations of the elderly are climbing. So far they're not shooting up quite like they did in 2014-2015, but health officials are watching the numbers closely.

The CDC estimates there are tens of thousands of deaths each year from flu and pneumonia.

One suburban San Diego case shows how serious the flu can be. Jennifer Burrough and her family didn't get flu shots this year after hearing reports that suggested it might not work very well this season.

Her 12-year-old son came home with the bug around the holidays, then her two youngest kids got sick and she did, too. They all recovered quickly. But her 48-year-old Navy veteran husband, Shawn Burrough, landed in the hospital. There, he had trouble breathing and his kidneys started shutting down. He was medically sedated and put on a breathing machine.

"We didn't figure it would be like this," Jennifer Burrough said. "You don't expect to wake up with sniffles and two days later find yourself in a medically induced coma. It was rapid, just rapid."



COURTESY PHOTO

Experts recommend you focus on positives rather than what you're missing out on when tackling resolutions. For example, aim to eat more fruits and vegetables rather than eating less candy.

How to make your food resolutions for the new year stick

The new year probably had many of you thinking about food and fitness goals. Weight loss, diet and exercise are consistently the most popular types of New Year's resolutions.

Unfortunately, come Dec. 31, less than 10 percent of people each year feel that they were successful with their resolutions. If you were one of the many people who resolved to eat better this year, what can you do to make sure you fall within that minority?

Make sure your resolutions are consistent with your values, not just a number on the scale.

Connecting your food and exercise choices to more than just weight can help you stick with what's important to you, even if you don't lose weight or see drastic health improvements like you expected. Maybe you want to resolve to eat more local foods and frequent the farmers market this summer because community is important to you. Maybe you want to exercise more so that you can enjoy

a longer and more active life with your loved ones because you value your family and friends. Maybe you would like to cook more this year to save your hard-earned money. There is much more to food and health than weight or appearance. People who make a change based on values are much more likely to stick with it than people who make a change based on weight loss.

Make a resolution's success reliant on something other than the weight.

"Losing weight" is not a behavior that you have direct control over. Choosing to eat an apple or a bag of chips is a behavior. Losing 5 pounds isn't. Choose a behavior goal instead, such as drinking more water or walking for 30 minutes every day. Just make sure it is something that you can directly affect with your actions.

Resolve to eat more.

While most people will choose to eat less of something as part of a resolution, consider choosing to eat more healthful foods. Instead of focusing

on less chocolate, try making a goal for more fruit. Chances are if you are consuming more of the nutrient-dense foods (like fruit, vegetables, whole grains, water and lean protein sources) there will be less room for the foods that are weak in nutrients (like many snack foods).

Get back to the basics.

There is no magic pill for health and weight loss and there is also no magic diet. While there are many books, websites, gyms and people who claim to have the perfect solution (for health or weight), it simply doesn't exist. Diets that eliminate one food or food group are difficult to sustain and don't promote overall health. Instead of choosing a diet that promises drastic weight loss or other outrageous claims, choose small behaviors that you can live with almost every day, forever. If you are questioning whether a diet is safe, be sure to talk to a registered dietitian or medical provider before you start.

MARGARET WILSON is a registered dietitian with the Sheridan Veterans Affairs Health Care System.

HAPPENINGS AT THE HUB

- Interested in ladies billiards? Any interested parties are asked to call (307) 672-2240, ext. 107. The Hub on Smith staff will take a consensus of Friday or Saturday mornings or afternoons beginning in January.
- Trivia Wednesdays began earlier this month at The Hub on Smith. The event will start at 10 a.m. in the café. No sign-up required; just stop by.
- An intergenerational chess league will begin Jan. 10 and will run through March 21. The league will meet each Wednesday from 6-7:30 p.m.

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Sign up at the YMCA by calling (307) 674-7488, and direct questions to Luke Gibson. The league is sponsored by the YMCA and The Hub.

The Hub on Smith will offer "Burgers and Bluegrass" Tuesday from 7-9 p.m. in the café.

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