



Epi-Center



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Winter Roundup!



Updates on Respiratory Diseases

Influenza and Other Viral Respiratory Illnesses

Let's get everyone on the same page first with a quick recap on influenza! [Influenza \(the "flu"\) may be mild/asymptomatic for some but potentially dangerous for others](#). An infection, caused by either type A or B, can weaken the immune system and lead to complications (ex: pneumonia and worsening heart disease). Symptoms can include fever, sore throat, muscle aches, and cough. Those who are ≥ 65 years old, are young children, or have certain health conditions are at greater risk of serious complications from influenza, so be sure to do your part to prevent them from getting sick!

[Now for the data](#). Between October and December, the state noted a strong increase in outpatient flu activity, jumping from low to high levels in less than a month. Flu activity level reached 12 (very high) on a scale from 1-13 by the end of December. In the metro Atlanta area alone, there were 609 hospitalizations for the fourth quarter. Respiratory viruses such as RSV and Rhino-Enterovirus have made their mark too, as there were 861 RSV and 492 Rhino-Enterovirus positive tests reported for the last week of December. [The public data may be reviewed on the Georgia \(GA\) Department of Public Health \(DPH\) website](#).



Pertussis

[Pertussis is a highly transmissible vaccine-preventable bacterial disease often associated with sudden, intense bouts of uncontrollable coughing and a high-pitched whoop \(common in children\) when the person breathes in again](#). This cough is often described as a barking or hacking cough. Pertussis symptoms can range from mild to severe depending on age, pre-existing health problems, and vaccination status. Infants, the elderly, and those who are immunocompromised are most at risk for severe infection.

Of the 51 presumptive/confirmed cases that have been reported in District 2's counties in 2024, 24 (47%) belonged to the last quarter. For comparison, there were 10 (77%) in 2022 and 8 (57%) in 2023 for the same quarter, marking a 140% and 200% increase, respectively.

What About the Bird Flu I Keep Hearing About?

[Avian influenza \(H5N1\), aka "bird flu", is a subtype of influenza A and can cause illness and death in birds, humans, and other animals](#). Those at increased risk are workers in regular contact with farm animals or bird populations. GA providers should continue to call 866-PUB-HLTH (866-782-4584) to notify GA DPH immediately if a patient with flu A or suspect flu fits these epidemiological risk factors for H5N1 infection so testing can be prioritized and expedited. *[Calling public health would ONLY BE APPROPRIATE if there is a patient \(positive for flu A or suspect flu\) who reports the aforementioned risk factors](#)*.

Currently, GA DPH is working closely with the GA Department of Agriculture (DA) to monitor the situation. The threat of bird flu to the general public is overall low right now. Questions regarding animal health should be directed to the DA. For more info/updates, please check the [GA DPH](#), [GA DA](#), [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), and [United States DA \(USDA\)](#) websites. Visit [here](#) for the GA avian influenza hotline, or call (770) 766-6850.

District 2 Public Health Serves the Following Counties: Banks, Dawson, Forsyth, Franklin, Habersham, Hall, Hart, Lumpkin, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union, & White



More Epidemiology Updates



How Do I Protect Myself, Friends, and Family?

Even though respiratory disease is abundant in winter, it's not too late to get your vaccines, flu or otherwise. [Every county health department in District 2 offers vaccine services](#), so reach out and inquire! Practice proper hand hygiene, and if you do find yourself ill, stay home and away from others. *It is recommended that you only return to normal activities after you haven't had a fever for at least 24 hours (without fever-reducing medication) AND symptoms have been improving for the same time period.*

CDS Program Updates

Home STI Test Kits

In December, there were 17 home test kit direct shipments requested. Of the respondents:

- 6 (35%) were male, 11 (61%) were female,
- 10 (59%) were between the ages of 35-48, and 7 (41%) were between the ages of 20-32.

Still interested in a home test kit? Reach out to one of our Communicable Disease Specialists (CDS) based on your county:

- Banks, Franklin, Union: Benjamin Scott (Benjamin.Scott@dph.ga.gov, 470-892-9243)
- Dawson, Forsyth, Lumpkin, Towns: Claudia Berry (Claudette.Berry@dph.ga.gov, 770-519-0515)
- Habersham, Hall, Hart, Rabun, Stephens, White: Sandy Cutright (Sandy.Cutright@dph.ga.gov, 678-780-0211)

Disease Reporting Updates

As of January 2025, individual routine COVID-19 cases are no longer reportable. However, deaths and outbreaks due to COVID-19 must still be reported. The updated reporting guidelines can be found on the [GA DPH disease reporting page](#). Please remember that notifiable disease/condition reporting should be done within a timely manner for immediate public health follow-up.

Immediate Reporting	Reporting Within 7 Days
Phone: (770) 519-7661 Public Health Line: +1 (866) 782-4584	Email: DPHDistrict2epi@gets.onmicrosoft.com
Fax: (770) 535-5848	Online: State Electronic Notifiable Disease Surveillance System (SENDSS)

EPI Spotlight: Kai Chen

Hey there! This is Kai; I'm an epidemiologist at the District 2 Office. I handle a lot of the EPI-Center newsletter writing, as well as data analysis and case/outbreak investigations. I graduated from the University of Georgia (UGA) in 2022 with a Bachelor of Science in Biology and in 2023 with a Master of Public Health. I first learned what epidemiology was in high school during a summer program, then resolved to pursue it during my time at UGA.

When I'm not busy, I enjoy reading fantasy novels/series and playing games such as Honkai: Star Rail, Genshin Impact, and Marvel Rivals (now that I've retired from competitive collegiate Overwatch, haha).

