

Live Well, Work Well

Quarterly
Newsletter



**United States May Experience
a Severe Flu Season**

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The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [warns](#) that the United States could be heading into another severe influenza (flu) season, driven by declining vaccination rates and a newly mutated strain of influenza A known as H3N2 subclade K. This variant, which has already fueled major outbreaks in the United Kingdom, Canada and Japan, is now appearing in U.S. cases. While overall flu activity remains low, early signs show infections rising quickly, especially among children. Last year's flu season was one of the worst in over a decade, claiming the lives of at least 280 children and causing record hospitalizations. Experts fear this year could follow a similar pattern if preventive measures aren't taken.

The subclade K strain emerged after this season's flu vaccine was formulated, meaning the shot isn't a perfect match. However, early data suggests that the vaccine still offers strong protection against severe illness and hospitalization—up to 75% in children and 30%-40% in adults. The bigger concern is that fewer Americans are getting vaccinated. In fact, data from health information and research company IQVIA revealed that pharmacies administered 2 million fewer flu shots in 2025 compared

to the same period in 2024. Combined with holiday travel and gatherings, this creates ideal conditions for the virus to spread as 2026 begins. Doctors emphasize that vaccination remains the best defense, along with good hygiene, wearing masks in crowded spaces and staying home when sick. [Click here](#) to check out the latest FluView data from the CDC.

Children under the age of five, older adults and those with chronic conditions face the highest risk of complications, which can include pneumonia and hospitalization. Experts urge families to get vaccinated as soon as possible, noting that it takes about two weeks for immunity to develop. With flu season still expected to peak in January, now's the time to act to reduce the impact of what could be a challenging winter.

Contact your doctor today if you have further questions about the current flu season and want to discuss ways to protect your household.

Research Reveals 4 Key Turning Points in Brain Aging

A new study from the University of Cambridge identified four major “turning points” in brain development and aging, showing that the brain doesn’t change in a steady, linear way but instead moves through distinct phases. Using MRI scans from nearly 4,000 people aged zero to 90, researchers found that these four pivotal ages occur around **9, 32, 66 and 83**, marking transitions between five broad periods: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, early aging and late aging. The most surprising finding for researchers? Adolescence lasts far longer than previously thought—well into the early 30s—before the brain’s wiring stabilizes into its adult pattern.

Around age 32, the brain undergoes its most dramatic structural shift, transitioning from the adolescent phase into adulthood, which is the longest and most stable period, lasting until approximately age 66. During this time, intelligence and personality tend to plateau, while brain networks become more compartmentalized. At age 66, subtle changes signal the start

of early aging, as white matter begins to degenerate and connectivity weakens. By age 83, the brain enters late aging, characterized by a sharp decline in global connectivity and an increased reliance on localized regions. This is a pattern linked to cognitive decline and conditions such as dementia.

Researchers say these findings could transform how mental health and neurodegenerative diseases are understood. Knowing when the brain is most vulnerable to change may help identify risk factors for conditions such as learning difficulties in childhood or dementia later in life. It also underscores the importance of lifelong brain health strategies (e.g., exercise, cognitive challenges and social engagement) to maintain resilience through these critical turning points.



Waist-to-Height Ratio May Outperform BMI in Predicting Heart Disease Risk

A new study suggests that the waist-to-height ratio (WHtR) could be a more accurate predictor of heart disease risk than the widely used body mass index (BMI). Researchers found that individuals with a larger waist relative to their height were significantly more likely to develop calcium buildup in their heart arteries, even if their BMI fell within a healthy range. This means that people who appear “normal weight” by BMI standards could still face elevated cardiovascular risk if their waist size is disproportionate to their height.

The study, published in *The Lancet Regional Health*, followed more than 2,700 adults and concluded that WHtR was more closely linked to heart disease risk than BMI or waist circumference alone. A WHtR of 0.5 or higher was associated with increased risk, making it a simple and practical tool for both doctors and patients. Unlike BMI, which doesn't account for fat distribution, WHtR focuses on abdominal fat, which

is a key driver of metabolic and atherosclerotic conditions. Experts say this finding could shift clinical practice, as WHtR is easy to measure at home with just a tape measure and offers a clearer picture of cardiovascular health.

While BMI has long been the standard for assessing weight-related health risks, it often fails to distinguish between muscle and fat or identify individuals with normal weight but high visceral fat. WHtR could help bridge that gap, providing a more accurate and accessible way to monitor heart health. Physicians recommend using WHtR in conjunction with other preventive strategies, such as regular exercise, balanced nutrition and routine screenings, to reduce the risk of heart disease.

Consult your doctor if you have questions or concerns about your body weight or risk of heart disease and other related conditions.



January: National Blood Donor Month

Winter is one of the most difficult times of the year to collect enough blood products and donations to meet patient needs. That’s why National Blood Donor Month is celebrated every January. Not only can you help others, but there are also health benefits to being a donor. Donated blood is tested to determine if any irregularities are present. Donating can also help eliminate any excess iron buildup in the blood, which can lower the risk of a heart attack. Moreover, the blood donation process typically burns up to 650 calories.

This month, resolve to be a blood donor. Before you roll up your sleeve, check if you meet the American Red Cross’ [requirements](#) to donate blood safely.

February: American Heart Month

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Cardiovascular disease and the conditions that lead to it can happen at any age. Some types of heart disease include arrhythmia, heart failure, heart attack and stroke.

This month, take time to check your cardiovascular health. Even though heart disease can be deadly for adults, it’s also preventable in most people. Risk factors include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, obesity, an unhealthy diet and physical inactivity. Contact your doctor to learn more about heart health and early warning signs.

March: National Nutrition Month

The current dietary guidelines for Americans emphasize balance—it’s not all or nothing. As such, eating right doesn’t need to be complicated. Healthy eating starts with nutritional food choices, which include plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein and dairy. A balanced diet also leaves room for personal preferences.

This month, assess your eating habits and educate yourself about the best ways to fuel your body. It comes down to making informed food choices and developing sustainable, healthy eating and physical activity habits.

Looking Ahead

April: National Donate Life Month

May: Mental Health Month

June: Alzheimer’s and Brain Awareness Month

The Benefits of Cutting Back on Alcohol

Alcohol consumption is deeply woven into social and cultural norms, often seen as a way to unwind or celebrate. However, excessive drinking can lead to serious health issues. It may even lead to alcohol use disorder or addiction, which affects nearly 29 million Americans, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Cutting back on alcohol, even moderately, can positively impact your health and wellness.

Research shows that reducing alcohol intake by any amount leads to improved health. When you cut back or stop drinking entirely, your body begins to heal over time, resulting in the following benefits:

- **Better sleep**—Drinking alcohol before bed can make you feel sleepy, but it disrupts your sleep cycle and interferes with circadian rhythms. As a result, you wake up frequently at night and get low-quality sleep. Cutting back on alcohol can improve your sleep quality, making you feel more rested.
- **Reduced stress**—When you drink less, your body releases lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, helping you feel calmer and less anxious.
- **Weight loss**—Alcohol is high in calories, which means reducing the amount you consume may help you drop some pounds. However, results vary per person. Heavy drinkers who eliminate alcohol for a longer period are more likely to lose weight than those who abstain for just a month.
- **Lower blood pressure**—Drinking less prevents the temporary spikes in blood pressure that occur after drinking. Over time, it can lead to a more stable and healthier blood pressure level, lowering your risk of developing hypertension.
- **Better immune response**—Cutting back on alcohol improves the production of cytokines, proteins that help fight off infections. Drinking less can also lead to a healthier gut microbiome and reduced oxidative stress, which are both crucial in immune function. Overall, drinking less helps reduce inflammation and allows your body to better fight off infections.
- **Improved liver health**—Your liver has a remarkable ability to recover from damage caused by excessive drinking. By reducing your alcohol intake, you allow your liver to regenerate and repair damaged tissue.

Any effort to lower your alcohol intake or avoid it entirely can significantly improve your health and overall well-being. While social pressures and habits can make cutting back a challenge, the rewards of doing so are well worth the effort.

If you struggle to cut back or quit drinking alcohol, seek help from support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, or consult a health care professional. You can also contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357) to find help near you.

4 Ways Hot Chocolate Is Good For You

Hot chocolate isn't just a winter comfort—it can offer real health benefits when prepared thoughtfully. Cocoa is naturally rich in antioxidants and minerals that support heart health and overall wellness. However, traditional recipes often include high amounts of sugar and saturated fat, which can outweigh the positives. While hot chocolate can provide many health benefits, keep in mind that health experts caution against exceeding the daily recommended sugar intake levels. The key is understanding the benefits and making smart choices to maximize them.

As such, hot chocolate can be part of a balanced diet if prepared with nutritious ingredients and enjoyed in moderation. Consider the following four ways that hot chocolate could be good for you:

- 1. It could support heart health.** Cocoa contains flavonoids, antioxidants that help relax blood vessels, improve circulation and lower blood pressure. These compounds may also reduce cholesterol and stabilize blood sugar levels when enjoyed in moderation.
- 2. It may balance blood sugar levels.** Hot chocolate mixes often have a couple of grams of fiber per serving. Fiber can protect against blood sugar spikes. Some research has also shown that cocoa flavonoids can help improve the body's insulin sensitivity and lower fasting blood sugar levels. Just be sure to keep portions reasonable, as roughly one heaping teaspoon

provides about 200 milligrams of cocoa flavonoids.

- 3. It can provide essential minerals.** Powdered hot chocolate often contains important minerals, such as magnesium, iron, potassium, phosphorus and zinc. These nutrients support muscle and nerve function, oxygen transport, cell function, bone strength and immune health, respectively. A cup of hot chocolate made from dark chocolate or cocoa powder can boost this intake.
- 4. It may boost mood.** The warmth and aroma of hot chocolate can promote relaxation, and cocoa contains compounds that may enhance feelings of well-being. A cup of hot chocolate may enhance alertness but also help you feel calm and balanced.

Hot chocolate can be a delicious way to warm up during the winter months while also supporting your health. Just be sure to keep an eye on the ingredients and note that add-ins like marshmallows and whipped cream may offset any potential benefits. Many store-bought hot chocolate mixes contain high amounts of sugar, so consider using a high-quality dark chocolate or cocoa powder. You can also use low-fat or plant-based milk (e.g., almond, oat, or soy) to reduce saturated fat and sweeten it naturally with honey or a sugar substitute. Spices, such as cinnamon or vanilla, or a pinch of sea salt can also add flavor without extra sugar. With a few simple tweaks, you can turn this cozy drink into a smart seasonal indulgence.

Understanding Gut Health

Gut health has been getting a lot of attention lately, and it's for a good reason. The healthy bacteria living inside your gut can help your body function at its best. Your gut, also known as the gastrointestinal or digestive tract, is a complex system that breaks down and absorbs the nutrients you eat and removes waste products. Not only does your gut digest food, but it also communicates information about hormone levels and general health to your brain, and it is a major part of your immune system.

In fact, nearly 70% of your immune system is found in the gut, as this is where your body encounters many pathogens. In addition to the main and accessory organs, there are trillions of bacteria, archaea, and fungi in the digestive tract—also referred to as the gut microbiome. These living organisms help with digestion, influence your immune system and affect your central nervous system. They also produce key vitamins and fatty acids, which further benefit gut health. Overall gut health and its microbiome are influenced by many factors such as lifestyle, stress and anxiety, nutrition, medications and disease.

Two similar-sounding terms commonly used when talking about gut health are “prebiotics” and “probiotics”:

- **Prebiotics** are specialized plant fibers that stimulate the growth of healthy gut bacteria. Examples of prebiotics include almonds, apples, bananas, Brussels sprouts, leeks, pears, plantains and sweet potatoes.

- **Probiotics** contain live organisms that directly add to the population of healthy microbes in your gut. Probiotics are often used interchangeably with fermented foods. Examples of good probiotics include kefir, kimchi, kombucha, miso, sauerkraut, sourdough, tempeh and yogurt.

The best way to maintain a healthy gut microbiome is to eat a wide range of fresh, whole foods, mainly from plant sources like fruits, vegetables, legumes, beans and whole grains. Consider the following foods you can incorporate into your diet to improve your gut bacteria:

- Plenty of vegetables, legumes, beans and fruit
- Fermented foods
- Foods high in prebiotic fiber
- Whole grains, including brown rice, whole oats, buckwheat and quinoa
- A plant-based diet
- Foods rich in polyphenols, such as beans, berries, ginger and dark chocolate

Your gut bacteria are essential for many aspects of your overall health. Consult your doctor before self-diagnosing issues or making changes to your gut health.

Try out these two healthy recipes from the USDA’s MyPlate Kitchen website.

Veggie Omelet in a Mug

Makes: 1 serving

Ingredients

- 2 eggs
- 2 Tbsp. fat-free milk
- 1 pinch salt
- 1 pinch black pepper
- ¼ cup finely chopped mushrooms (or other vegetables)
- 2 Tbsp. low-fat cheddar cheese, shredded

Directions

1. Lightly grease the inside of a 12-oz. microwave-safe mug.
2. Use a fork to combine the eggs, milk, salt and pepper in the mug and stir well. Mix in the vegetables and cheese.
3. Microwave on high for 45 seconds. Stir. Return the mixture to the microwave and cook on high until it has puffed and set, 60 to 90 seconds. The omelet may look wet on the top, but it will dry as it cools.
4. Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours.

Nutritional Information (per serving)

Calories	203
Total fat	13 g
Saturated fat	5 g
Cholesterol	423 mg
Sodium	386 mg
Carbohydrate	4 g
Dietary fiber	0 g
Total sugars	2 g
Added sugars included	0 g
Protein	18 g
Vitamin D	3 mcg
Calcium	197 mg
Iron	2 mg
Potassium	253 mg

Spicy Chicken and Potato Soup

Makes: **6 servings**

Ingredients

- 1 cup onion (chopped)
- 1 Tbsp. garlic (finely chopped)
- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil
- ¼ lb. chicken (cut up and skin removed)
- 4 cups water
- 6 small red potatoes (chopped)
- ¼ cup white or brown rice (uncooked)
- ½ tsp. chili powder
- 1 cup fresh peas (or 8 oz. low-sodium green peas)
- ½ tsp. cayenne or jalapeño chilies (diced), optional
- ½ cup parsley or cilantro (chopped), optional

Directions

1. In a large pot, brown the onion and garlic in oil over medium to high heat for 5 minutes.
2. Add chicken to the pot and brown for about 5 minutes.
3. Add water, potatoes, rice and chili powder to the pot.
4. Bring the pot to a boil and cook for 15 minutes.
5. Lower the heat and cook for about 15 to 20 minutes. Stir the pot every 10 minutes.
6. Add peas and cook for about 8 minutes. If using cayenne or jalapeño chilies, add them as well. Mix well.
7. Remove pot from heat. If using parsley or cilantro, add that now.
8. Mix well and cover for 5 minutes. Serve hot.

Nutritional Information (per serving)

Calories	240
Total fat	4 g
Saturated fat	1 g
Cholesterol	12 mg
Sodium	70 mg
Carbohydrate	42 g
Dietary fiber	5 g
Total sugars	4 g
Added sugars included	0 g
Protein	10 g
Vitamin D	0 mcg
Calcium	45 mg
Iron	2 mg
Potassium	887 mg