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BREAKING NEWS

Amid January flu and COVID season, some hospitals are asking patients to mask up again

By Ilana Arougheti

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As flu season continues in Chicago, some hospitals are reinstating mask mandates.

All three Rush hospitals — including Rush University Medical Center, Rush Copley Medical Center and Rush Oak Park Hospital — are again requiring patients, visitors and staff members to wear masks on-site.

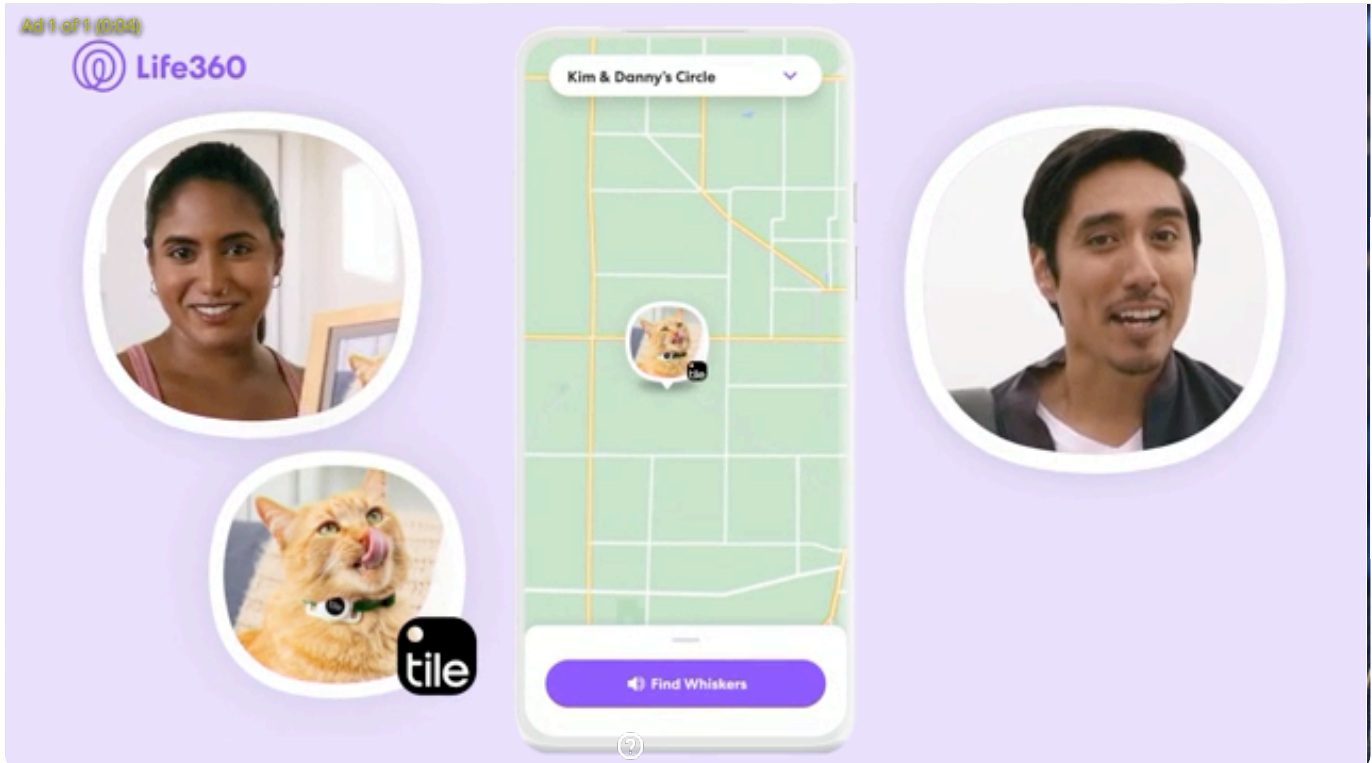
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As of this week, masks are mandatory for everyone at registration and in patient waiting rooms, along with other parts of each hospital.

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“We reinstituted masking primarily because of the fairly dramatic increase in influenza in the last two or three weeks,” said Dr. John Segreti, medical director of infection control and prevention at Rush. “Influenza numbers are going up pretty dramatically. The numbers for COVID are going up slightly. Hospitalizations are going up.”

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For hospital systems like Rush, bringing back mask policies is a low-cost way to keep patients and staffers from transmitting respiratory viruses to each other, Segreti said.

“If you wear a mask for protection, there’s evidence that it works,” Segreti said. “It may not add very much, but it probably does help to prevent transmission if you’re not infected.”

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Segreti recommends that residents resume masking indoors throughout their daily lives, especially in poorly ventilated rooms.



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Currently, NorthShore University Health System requires masking for patients with symptoms of respiratory viruses, and recommends everyone else mask up

in patient care areas regardless.

Northwestern Medicine clinics and hospitals also require patients wear a mask if they have symptoms of a respiratory virus. Patients and staff members can also ask each other to wear a mask while doctors are in a patient's room.



A pedestrian wears a mask while passing the Olson Pavilion at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago on Jan. 4, 2024. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

Flu and COVID-19 vaccination rates have been low this year, Segreti said. Staying up to date on vaccinations is especially important if you're older, immunocompromised or experiencing comorbidities like heart or lung disease.

The Chicago COVID-19 risk factor **rose** to medium this week, for the first time in a year. About 34 patients per day are being hospitalized with complications

related to COVID.

“You can’t tell COVID from flu from RSV just based on symptoms,” Segreti said. “You really have to get tested to be able to differentiate those.

Though influenza cases are rising, along with COVID cases to a lesser extent, RSV cases are becoming less common, Segreti said. Still, Rush’s mask policy is meant to work against all three respiratory conditions, as well as others with similar symptoms.

Segreti expects flu season to last another four to eight weeks.

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