

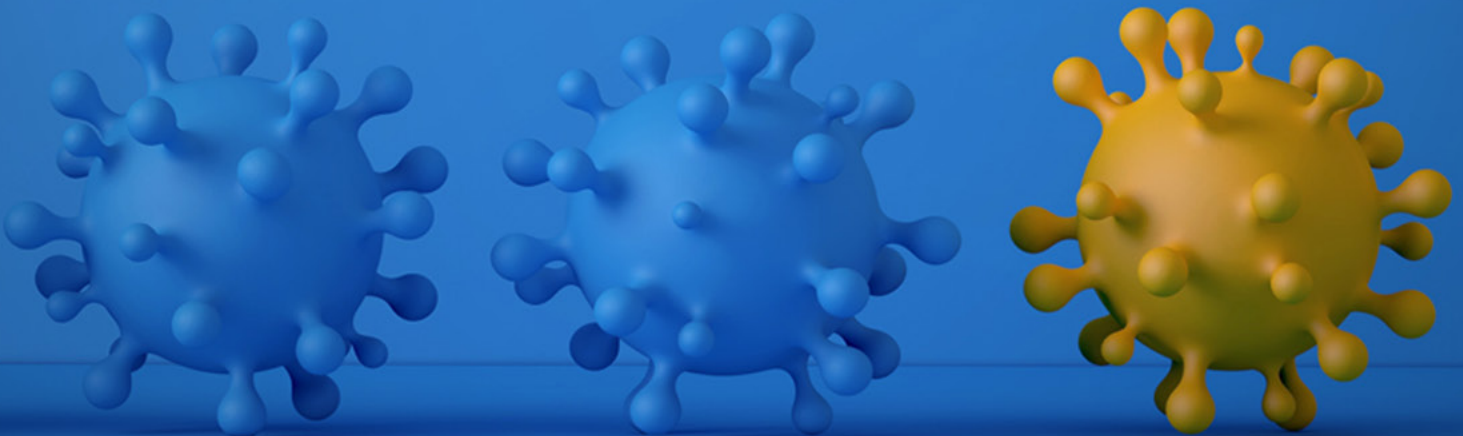


# How To Prepare for the Fall Viral Season Amidst the Ongoing Nursing Shortage

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Respiratory virus season typically peaks between December and February, but it can start as early as October and last into May. During this time, cases of influenza, RSV, and COVID-19 increase significantly, putting added strain on hospitals and other healthcare facilities that may already be struggling with the current nursing shortage. Employers must maintain adequate staffing during this time to serve their communities properly and protect the health and welfare of their nurses and other team members.

Preparing for the fall viral season begins months in advance. Start evaluating your care management staffing solutions, workflow, and systems now so you can weather the storm of the flu season without putting undue stress and strain on your valued nursing team.



## Understanding the Nursing Shortage

The current U.S. nursing shortage is a multifaceted problem with several contributing factors. The aging baby boomer generation has long been recognized as a potential challenge for the healthcare industry. By 2030, every baby boomer will be 65 or older.<sup>1</sup> This increases healthcare demand for this population even as many older nurses are retiring.

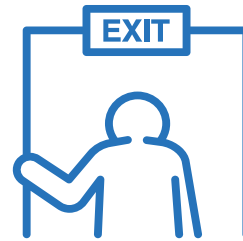
Meanwhile, younger nurses have faced barriers to entering the workforce. Due to faculty shortages, lack of classroom space, and insufficient clinical sites, nursing schools turned away almost 92,000 qualified baccalaureate or graduate nursing program applicants in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Retention is also low for young nurses who are already working. Nurses under the age of 35 are more likely to feel anxious, depressed, and emotionally unhealthy.<sup>2</sup> Sixty-three percent of these younger nurses are considering or planning to leave the profession.<sup>2</sup>

Many states anticipate a deficit in the number of nurses available to meet the growing demand for healthcare providers. Alaska, South Carolina, South Dakota, California, New Jersey, Texas, and Georgia all anticipate a nursing supply that's insufficient to meet local demand by 2030.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, other states anticipate a surplus. With proper planning and robust recruiting efforts, healthcare facilities may be able to draw these nurses in.



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## Preparing for the Trials of Flu Season

Though the respiratory virus season may not peak until February, healthcare providers must plan months in advance to ensure adequate staffing during this challenging time. Flu season has many complications. Not only is there an increased need for nurses due to the surge of incoming patients, but there's also a concurrent shortage of nurses as their work environment naturally increases their risk of personal sickness. In acute care hospitals, presenteeism surged during flu season, with 71.3% of nurses reporting that they went to work despite feeling ill.<sup>3</sup>

Strategic workforce planning can help prevent presenteeism, which increases patient exposure to viruses. A flexible hiring strategy makes it possible to bring in additional help as needed so your facility can survive the seasonal surge of flu, COVID-19, and RSV cases without taking on excess staff that won't be needed come summer. Temporary staffing allows providers to specifically **request professionals with the necessary skills** and flu season experience to meet these specific needs, often leaving behind valuable knowledge when their assignments end.



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## **Enhancing Recruitment Efforts**

The California-based union National Nurses United (NNU) identified hospitals' staffing plans and work conditions as the source of many nursing shortages. The NNU called for hospitals to "create a safe, sustainable work environment where nurses can feel confident about their ability to provide the best nursing care possible for their patients."<sup>4</sup> Healthcare facilities that anticipate healthcare staffing shortages during flu season need to remain highly competitive in the workforce to attract and retain top talent.

Develop a robust suite of non-salary benefits for your healthcare employees, and make your dedication to employee care part of your employer branding. Nurses experience increased fatigue, burnout, and other stressors during flu season, so it's important to provide perks that help them cope with these challenges. Try options such as:



- Virtual therapy to support their mental health
- Quiet meditation spaces to regroup during long days
- Healthy meal delivery at the workplace
- Employer-sponsored fitness, self-care, or stress management classes
- Rideshare benefits or complimentary shuttles from nearby stations where commuting is difficult

Evaluate your recruitment channels and make sure you're promoting your competitive benefits and supportive work environment in the right places. Working with a staffing agency is the best way to build a flexible workforce. Temporary staffing solutions allow you to quickly fortify your workforce in response to surging respiratory viruses so you can deliver the prompt response your patients need.

## **Optimizing Existing Resources**

Optimize your current workforce ahead of the flu season so you're prepared to adapt seamlessly when you see a surge in patients. Expand the role of your NPs and PAs to accommodate the influx of patients. NPs and PAs can provide the same services as primary care providers for common cases of the flu and other respiratory viruses. Enabling these employees to take over the workload of some PCPs will facilitate faster service.

Communicate your response plan for flu season clearly to everyone in your workforce. Standardize your processes and procedures, and empower nurses to delegate tasks appropriately. Review and implement proper screening and triage procedures to promptly isolate symptomatic patients and minimize potential exposures. These responsibilities can extend to front office staff, who can instruct patients on proper masking and hand sanitizing while directing them to the appropriate waiting areas. Maintain written copies of the plan so you can quickly onboard temporary staff members and maintain continuity of care.

## **Technological and Process Innovations**

Evaluate your systems for workforce management and patient scheduling months ahead of flu season. Optimize your processes and procedures as needed so you're prepared to handle increased patient flow. Focus on developing a resilient system that can adapt efficiently to the addition of temporary nurses as well as an increase in call-ins should your workforce succumb to the flu.

If you're not already using telehealth solutions, this is an optimal time to incorporate this feature. Healthcare providers can often diagnose and treat low-acuity cases of the flu remotely. You can also implement a workflow that allows RNs, PAs, and PCPs to order flu or COVID-19 testing via a telehealth visit so patients can skip directly to testing on arrival and minimize their time in the office.

## **Building a Resilient Workforce**

The stressors of respiratory virus season can put a significant strain on healthcare providers. Make sure you're prepared to maintain a supportive work environment during this trying time. Create a **culture of collaboration and teamwork**. Prioritize staff recognition so your hardworking nurses get the appreciation they need. Offer appreciation in tangible ways by offering perks such as catered food in the break room, five-minute chair massages, and other benefits employees can enjoy while on the go.

It's never too soon to implement long-term strategies for sustainability as well. Build partnerships with educational institutions to support ongoing professional development. Target your best nurses for leadership training opportunities when the flu season is over. If you struggle with staffing year-round, these perks may entice some temporary employees to stay on permanently, providing solutions that will last year-round.

## **Equipping Your Facility for Fall**

Start preparing now for the upcoming respiratory virus season with proactive strategies and powerful partnerships that will keep your facility running smoothly despite the influx of patients. Medix is a leading **healthcare staffing agency** with over 20 years of experience providing quality staffing solutions. We handle screening, credentialing, and hiring to deliver a prompt and efficient source of nurses when you need them most. With our temporary staffing solutions, you can overcome the challenges of flu season and give your patients and nurses the care and support they need.

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3. Paul B. Tchounwou, "Does Seasonal Influenza Related Hospital Occupancy Surge Impact Hospital Staff Sickness Presenteeism and Productivity Costs?". National Library of Medicine. January 11, 2022. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8775749/>.

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