



MOHSS Quarterly Newsletter

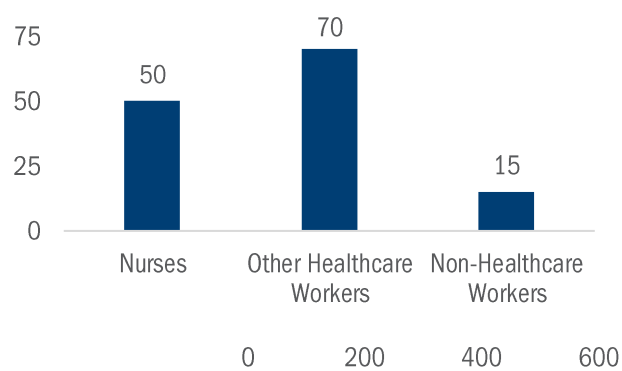
RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES

Recognizing the Impact of Influenza, COVID-19, & Other Respiratory Illnesses in Montana

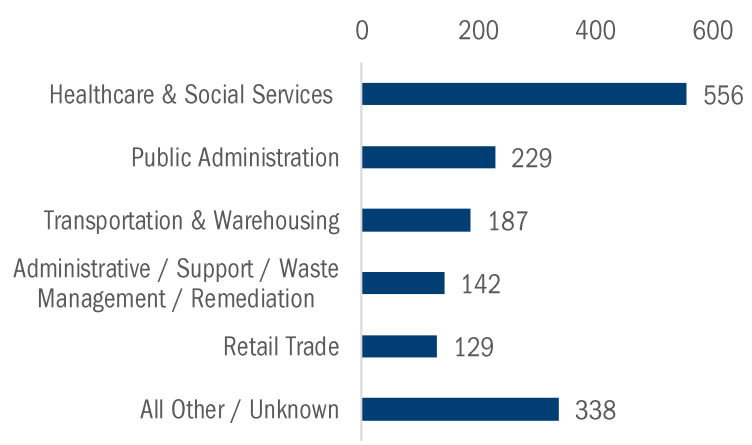
Winter brings many seasonal hazards related to cold weather, including sub-freezing temperatures, heavy snowfall and subsequent icy conditions, and reduced daylight. Much has been written about avoiding common workplace injuries in the winter, especially falls, which nearly double in frequency during the cold months.¹ However, a mixture of winter atmospheric conditions (cold and dry air) and social conditions (more time spent indoors, increased travel, and increased socialization around major holidays) results in increased respiratory disease activity during the late fall and winter months.²² This newsletter examines the available data on the spread of respiratory illnesses and provides recommendations for staying healthy through the winter.

Workers' Compensation Data on Respiratory Illnesses

Between 2014 and 2023, the Montana Department of Labor & Industry (DLI) received 135 workplace injury reports for respiratory illnesses other than COVID-19.³³ Nearly all reports were filed by workers in medical professions who were exposed to respiratory diseases from patients. In addition to cases of influenza and the common cold, workers reported exposure to diseases such as whooping cough, tuberculosis, and meningitis.

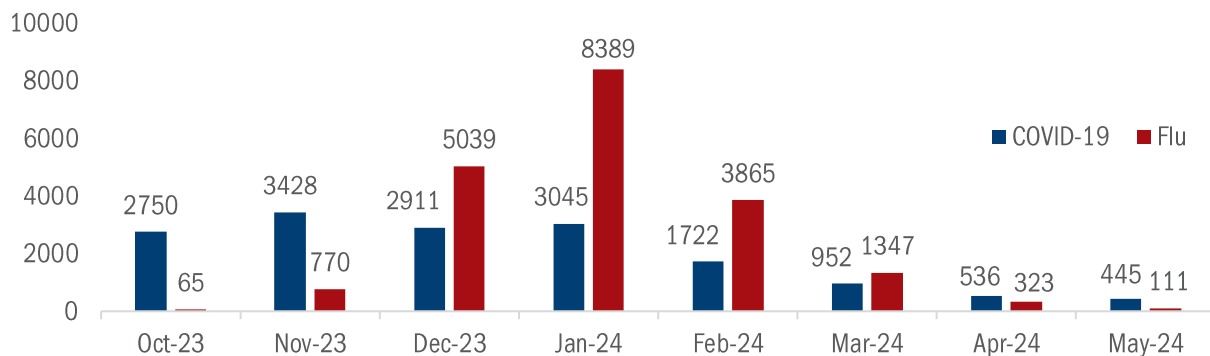


The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 significantly increased the number of workers' compensation claims for respiratory illness. There were 1,581 associated reports filed between 2020 and 2023; over 75% of claims were filed in 2020-2021, the first two years of the pandemic. While claims for COVID-19 came from a variety of occupations, healthcare professions represented the largest plurality. Other common occupations filing reports for COVID-19 included law enforcement officers, delivery or passenger drivers, long-term care workers, and firefighters.



More Information from the Public Health Perspective

While workers' compensation data provides some insight into the impacts of respiratory illness on Montana workers, these reports alone are insufficient for understanding the ways in which these diseases pose a hazard to workers in Montana. The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) monitors respiratory disease within



that state. DPHHS received reports of over 35,000 cases of influenza and COVID-19 between October 2023 and May 2024.⁴ Approximately 4.6% of reported cases resulted in hospitalization and 0.22% resulted in death. Further research is needed to determine if these patients contracted influenza through work or if the illness cause the patients to miss work. However, these findings are sufficient to conclude that respiratory illnesses greatly affect the everyday lives of Montanans, highlighting the importance of practicing healthy habits to prevent the spread of respiratory illness.

Healthy Habits to Prevent the Spread of Respiratory Illnesses

The Montana Occupational Health and Safety Surveillance Program (MOHSS) recommends both employees and employers take the following precautions to help limit the spread of respiratory disease:

Employees

- Stay home if you're experiencing respiratory illness symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, or runny/stuff nose.
- If you cannot stay home, wear a well-fitting mask and maintain distance from others.
- Avoid close interaction with sick individuals.
- Maintain good hygiene by washing your hands regularly, avoiding touching your face, and cleaning commonly-used surfaces.
- Maintain good overall health by eating well, drinking plenty of water, getting enough rest, exercising, and managing stress.
- Get vaccinated against Influenza and COVID-19. Updated vaccines are currently available. Adults over 65 may be eligible for the RSV vaccine as well.

Employers

- If possible, provide employees with paid sick leave and encourage workers to recover at home to help prevent the spread of disease.
- Ensure that employees have access to hand washing stations and/or hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- If working indoors, ensure the workspace has clean air by opening doors and windows when possible and by maintaining building ventilation systems.
- If working outdoors, ensure employees have proper clothing to avoid hypothermia.
- Promote general physical and mental health in the workplace.

More information can be found from the [Montana Department of Public Health & Human Services](#) or from the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#). From everyone at DLI, have a happy and healthy holiday season, and we look forward to providing you with more insight and guidance in 2025!

¹ Publications include [Injuries by Season \(DLI\)](#), [Winter Weather \(OSHA\)](#), and [Cold Stress \(CDC-NIOSH\)](#).

² These environmental and social factors are identified in research such as [Roles of Humidity and Temperature in Shaping Influenza Seasonality \(NIH\)](#).

³ From the Montana Department of Labor & Industry's Workers Compensation Administrative Network.

⁴ From the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service's [Pan-Respiratory Dashboard](#)