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With flu hospitalizations up again, MGH turns to Gatorade in place of IVs

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By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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Flu activity has spiked nationwide, with 10 children dead as a result of the virus last week, according to new figures released Friday by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In Massachusetts, the latest flu statistics were slightly less discouraging, with reports of influenza-like illness dropping for the second straight week.

But the news here wasn't all good. Flu-associated hospitalizations jumped last week, as the state continues to reel from a particularly bad flu season.

At Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, most of the approximately 1,000 beds are filled on a typical day, and with significant numbers of extra patients showing up recently with flu-like illnesses, it

has stretched the hospital thin.

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“It does put an additional strain on us because we do have to find space for those extra people,” said Dr. O’Neil Britton, chief medical officer and senior vice president at MGH. “It’s that much more work for our already hard-working staff.”

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The influx of suspected flu cases coupled with an ongoing national shortage of intravenous, or IV, bags in the wake of Hurricane Maria has prompted MGH staff to give certain patients electrolyte-rich sports drinks — think Gatorade — instead of hooking them up to an IV.

People suffering from the flu often become dehydrated and lose key electrolytes because of their fevers and suppressed appetites.

Britton said the sports drink alternative is reserved for patients well enough to drink the liquid.

People with serious dehydration issues are still given IVs.

The IV bag shortage, which officials [hope will improve in the coming weeks](#), has been driven by the devastation that the hurricane

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caused in Puerto Rico, where much of the United States' supply of IV bags is manufactured.

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Officials at other Boston-area hospitals — Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Tufts Medical Center, Brigham and Women's Hospital, and Boston Medical Center in Boston as well as UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester — said they've seen significant numbers of patients with flu-like symptoms. But not in greater numbers than they can handle, at least not yet.

"We're still in the meat of flu season, especially here in Massachusetts," where the flu hasn't hit as hard as in other parts of the country, said Dr. Graham Snyder, an infectious disease specialist at Beth Israel.

"It may not have peaked yet here. We're still seeing an increasing number of cases," at Beth Israel.

[This season](#), the flu is already the most widespread nationally since public health authorities began tracking it more than a dozen years ago. And the [latest data](#) released Friday by the CDC showed another spike in flu activity, with the virus remaining geographically widespread.

As hospitals in New England and around the country have grappled with a spike in admissions, the epidemic has caused [extended wait times](#) for care, and many hospitals have doled out surgical [masks](#) and in some cases [gloves](#) to patients and families in their waiting rooms.

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■ In Rhode Island earlier this month, three hospitals temporarily diverted ambulances from their emergency rooms after being overwhelmed with a mix of suspected flu cases and accidents related to extremely cold weather, according to the [Providence Journal](#).

■ Some hospitals in [other parts of the country](#), including California, have also sent ambulances away and set up tents in parking lots that are normally reserved for major disasters to treat influxes of flu patients, according to the [Los Angeles Times](#). At some locations, children have been banned from visiting hospitalized loved ones, nurses have been flown in from out of state, and surgeries have been canceled because of the flu.

The effects aren't limited to hospitals either.

Catholic churches in some parts of the country, including in [Maine](#) and [New Mexico](#), have suspended certain practices, such as the shaking of hands as a sign of peace, holding hands during the recitation of prayers, and the sharing of cups of wine at communion because of concerns about the spread of the flu.

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