



# COVID-19 and the flu

How are they similar?  
What's different?

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**F**eeling achy and feverish? Have a sore throat and cough, or shortness of breath? During a typical winter, you'd probably assume you have the flu. But COVID-19 has made things more complicated – and scary. Many symptoms of influenza are also symptoms of COVID-19.

Other symptoms shared by both illness include fatigue, runny or stuffy nose, headache, and vomiting and diarrhea.

Although they're both contagious respiratory diseases, flu and COVID-19 have some key differences. For example, one known symptom unique to COVID-19 is change in or loss of taste or smell.

As it continues to try to learn more about both illnesses, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

wants you to know about several other similarities and differences between COVID-19 and the flu.

## How long does it take for symptoms to appear?

**Similarity:** One or more days can pass between someone becoming infected and experiencing symptoms.

**Differences:** Typically with COVID-19, an individual develops symptoms five days after being infected, but symptoms can appear as early as 48 hours or as late as two weeks after infection, and the time range can vary. With the flu, a person typically develops symptoms anywhere from one to four days after infection.

## How long is an infected person contagious?

**Similarity:** In both cases, people can be contagious for at least 24 hours before experiencing any symptoms.

**Differences:** Most people with the flu are contagious for about a day before they show symptoms. Older children and adults appear to be most contagious during the initial three to four days of their illness but many remain

contagious for about seven days. Infants and people with weakened immune systems can be contagious for even longer.

How long someone can spread the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is still under investigation. It's possible for people to spread it for about two days before experiencing signs or symptoms and remain contagious for at least 10 days after signs or symptoms first appear. If someone is asymptomatic or his or her symptoms go away, it's possible that he or she will be contagious for at least 10 days after testing positive for COVID-19.

### How do COVID-19 and the flu spread?

**Similarities:** Both can spread from person to person – between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet). Both are spread mainly by droplets made when infected people cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

It may be possible that a person can get infected by physical human contact such as shaking hands, or by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching his or her own mouth, nose or eyes.

People infected with flu or COVID-19 may spread it to other people before they themselves begin showing symptoms. Some infected people have very mild symptoms or never develop symptoms at all (called asymptomatic).

**Differences:** COVID-19 is more contagious among certain populations and age groups. Also, COVID-19 has been observed to have more “super-spreading events.” This means the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 can quickly and easily spread to a lot of people – resulting in continuous spread among people as time progresses.

### Who's at highest risk?

**Similarities:** Both can result in severe illness and complications. People at highest risk include older adults, individuals with certain existing medical conditions such as diabetes, and pregnant women.

**Differences:** Healthy children have a higher risk of having complications from flu than having complications related to COVID-19. However, infants and children with existing medical conditions are at increased risk for both flu and COVID-19. School-aged children infected with COVID-19 are at higher risk of Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children – a rare and severe complication of COVID-19. To learn more, go to [cdc.gov/mis-c/](https://www.cdc.gov/mis-c/).

### What are some of the complications?

**Similarities:** Both can result in complications, including pneumonia; respiratory failure; fluid in the lungs; sepsis; heart attacks and stroke; multiple-organ failure; worsening of chronic medical conditions involving the lungs, heart, nervous system or diabetes; inflammation of the heart, brain or muscle tissues; and secondary bacterial infections, which are infections that occur in people who already have been infected with the flu or COVID-19.

**Differences:** Most people with the flu will recover in a few days to less than two weeks, although some will develop complications. Additional complications associated with COVID-19 can include MIS-C and blood clots in the veins and arteries of the lungs, heart, legs or brain.



### What about vaccines?

**Similarities:** All vaccines must be approved or authorized for emergency use by the Food and Drug Administration.

**Differences:** Multiple FDA-licensed influenza vaccines are produced annually to protect against the three or four flu viruses that scientists anticipate will circulate each year. At press time, no vaccine had been approved to prevent COVID-19. However, vaccine developers and other researchers and manufacturers are expediting the development of a vaccine.

Testing may be needed to help confirm a diagnosis in someone who's experiencing shared symptoms of flu and COVID-19, the CDC says. If you're not feeling well, call your doctor right away. And help prevent the spread of both illnesses by washing your hands, covering your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze, wearing a mask in public, and keeping your distance from other people. **FS&H**

Note: The information in this article was current at the time of publication and may change as more becomes known.