

Do you have the flu or COVID-19? How to spot the differences between symptoms

December 2 2020, by Brooke Cain



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The timing is pretty awful: We're entering flu season during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when most of the nation is experiencing serious spikes in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations.

So what are the differences between the two illnesses, and how do we

know which one we might have? Can you get them both at the same time?

First, a few fast facts:

- The flu (influenza) and COVID-19 are both respiratory illnesses, and both are contagious, but they are not the same virus.
- COVID-19 spreads more easily than the flu, according to the Centers for Disease Control, and can cause more serious illnesses in some people.
- COVID symptoms don't always show up as fast as flu symptoms, and people seem to stay sick longer with COVID than with the flu.

But as far as the actual symptoms, there are few differences.

The CDC advises that since it's hard to tell the difference between COVID-19 and seasonal flu symptoms, it's best to get testing to confirm a diagnosis.

Here's more information on symptoms.

COVID-19 symptoms

Not every person infected with the new [coronavirus](#) has all symptoms listed here.

COVID-19 symptoms include: fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or [runny nose](#), nausea or vomiting, diarrhea.

Seasonal flu symptoms

The list of [flu symptoms](#) is very similar to COVID symptoms: fever or feeling feverish/chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches and fatigue.

With the flu, some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

The bottom line: COVID-19 and the flu essentially have the same symptoms, except the "new loss of sense of taste or smell" is unique to COVID. The other main difference is that COVID causes more serious illnesses and more deaths in some people, so take it seriously.

Could you have COVID and the flu at the same time?

The CDC says that yes, it's possible to have both viruses at the same time. If you are experiencing symptoms and believe you are sick, contact a physician to be tested for the flu and COVID-19.

What about flu and COVID-19 vaccines?

There are flu vaccines available, and the CDC advises everyone age 6 months and older get the shot (with rare exceptions).

The COVID-19 vaccines are starting to be approved by the FDA, with health providers, first responders and the elderly listed as among the first people expected to receive it by the end of this year. For most people, the COVID vaccine will be available later in 2021.

What about colds and allergies?

Signs of a cold commonly include sneezing, a runny/stuffy nose, aches and a sore throat. A cough can accompany a cold (particularly in later stages of a cold), but fevers are considered rare.

With airborne allergies, [common symptoms](#) include a runny/stuffy nose, sneezing and itchy eyes. You will sometimes have a [sore throat](#) with allergies and sometimes a cough. Sinus congestion can also lead to headaches. You should never have muscle aches or fever with allergies.

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