

Q&A: Is it COVID, flu, or allergies? How to protect yourself and loved ones this season

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Flu season is here once again. And many questions have formed over the last couple of years about how you can stay safe from both the influenza (flu) and COVID-19 viruses, as well as how to tell if your symptoms

may be caused by seasonal allergies or a different virus instead.

UChicago Medicine infectious diseases experts are here to help address your concerns and offer up some key advice on how to stay safe this season.

Below, Allison Bartlett, professor at University of Chicago Medicine and associate medical director of pediatric infection control, answers commonly asked questions.

Does COVID-19 or influenza pose a greater risk for people this season?

Either virus can make you very sick or lead to death, which is why it's essential to get vaccinated and also to avoid close contact with others when sick. There are definitely populations that are more at risk for severe complications from each infection. Older adults and people with chronic underlying health conditions seem to be much more likely to get severely ill with COVID-19. And kids, especially infants under 1, and [pregnant women](#) are more likely to have severe infections with influenza.

Does having COVID-19 give you any antibodies against a respiratory virus like the flu?

Unfortunately not. Having one virus does not protect you from the other.

How can you tell if you have the flu, COVID-19, seasonal allergies or a different virus?

The best way to tell what kind of [respiratory virus](#) you have is to get

tested. Symptoms can be nearly impossible to tell apart. This is especially true between COVID-19 and the flu, with the notable exception that some people with COVID-19 lose their sense of taste and smell. Add in the fact that people can have one of these two viruses without symptoms, and it's basically impossible to tell one from the other on your own.

Testing determines the [best treatment](#) for your symptoms and how long you should stay home from work or school. The good news is that many [health care providers](#) who are doing coronavirus tests should be able to test you for the flu at the same time. There are many other viruses that can cause respiratory symptoms, so even if you test negative for COVID and flu, you should practice good respiratory hygiene: cover your cough, throw tissues away after use, wash your hands frequently.

What steps can you take to avoid getting COVID-19 and the flu?

Many of the steps we take to protect ourselves from the coronavirus are the same things we need to do to keep us safe from influenza. The most important thing you can do to keep yourself and those around you safe from both viruses is to stay up-to-date on your COVID-19 and flu vaccinations.

You should get a flu shot even if you've already had the flu this season. The vaccine prevents against four different strains of the virus and we expect at least one more (Flu B) to be circulating later this season.

Practicing these good habits is also a great way to stay healthy:

- If you're feeling ill, keep your distance from others and avoid close contact with those who may have COVID-19 or the flu.

- Wash your hands often to prevent the spread of the virus.
- Cover your mouth when sneezing and keep from rubbing your eyes, mouth and nose.

Will the flu shot protect me against the coronavirus?

The flu shot can help prevent people from becoming sick from influenza but won't provide specific protection against COVID-19. And the COVID-19 vaccine alone will not prevent you from getting the flu. It is strongly recommended that you receive both vaccines for maximum protection.

Can Tamiflu or the flu shot treat COVID-19?

Tamiflu or a flu shot will not directly treat or lessen the symptoms of COVID-19. But you can get vaccinated against the flu and COVID-19, which can help prevent an infection and lessen severity. And if you get sick with influenza or have been exposed to it, you can take [antiviral medication](#) like oseltamivir (Tamiflu) to prevent getting sick.

COVID-19 treatment options are available and vary depending on the severity of your symptoms and health history. Antiviral treatments can help prevent the virus from spreading and avoid serious illness.

What should you do if you develop influenza or COVID-19 symptoms?

If you have any symptoms, stay home, stay away from other people and try to isolate yourself to prevent the spread to others. Try to get tested within 48 hours of the start of your symptoms.

If it's influenza, your [health care provider](#) can prescribe medication to

help your symptoms improve faster.

If it's COVID-19, your health care provider may recommend one of the treatment options referenced above.

Will the pneumonia vaccine protect me against the flu or COVID-19?

The [pneumonia vaccine](#) helps protect against a variety of bacteria that can cause bacterial pneumonia. The pneumonia vaccine won't prevent flu or COVID-19, but it can help prevent complications that may come after.

Can I boost my immune systems to protect against flu or COVID-19?

We wish there were a list of things we could do to help our immune systems prevent us from getting sick with the flu or the coronavirus. But there's no magic immune-boosting drug—only vaccination. Instead, focus on eating a healthy, varied diet and getting enough sleep. Also, make sure you've got any chronic medical conditions under control.

Can I do anything to decrease my chance of getting very sick if I've been exposed?

Once an exposure to COVID-19 has happened, there's not a lot we can do to modify who gets sick from it. If you have been exposed to influenza, your physician may give you some medication like Relenza (zanamivir), Tamiflu (oseltamivir) and Rapivab (peramivir) within 48 hours of exposure. However, the best thing you can do is focus on avoiding exposure.

Are there new RSV vaccines available for adults?

In 2023, there are finally ways to protect infants and loved ones from RSV during virus season. Nirsevimab is a newly-approved, one-time injection that provides immediate protection to infants 0 to 8 months old and reduces risk of RSV-related hospitalization significantly. All infants born at Comer Children's and Ingalls Memorial during RSV season will be offered this injection. Infants less than 8 months old at the start of RSV season can receive nirsevimab from their pediatrician and it can be given along with other routine immunizations.

UChicago Medicine is also offering two newly approved RSV vaccinations to eligible adults. A vaccine known as Abrysvo is available to pregnant individuals between their 32nd and 36th weeks. UChicago Medicine patients over 60 can also receive an RSV vaccine known as Arexvy. These adult vaccinations are available during physician office visits and both provide key protection for those at highest risk of severe RSV symptoms.

Provided by University of Chicago

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