

Is it Flu or COVID-19?

Similarities and Differences Between Flu and COVID-19 Among Adults

Influenza (flu) and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses. COVID-19 is caused by an infection with the coronavirus (called SARS-CoV-2) and flu is caused by infections with influenza A and B viruses.

	Flu	Similarities	COVID-19
Symptoms	Symptoms typically appear within 1-4 days after exposure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fever/chills • Cough • Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing • Fatigue • Sore throat • Runny or stuffy nose • Muscle pain • Headache • Vomiting • Diarrhea <p>One or more days can pass between when a person becomes infected and symptoms appear.</p>	Symptoms typically appear 2-14 days after exposure and may include a loss of sense of smell and/or taste.
Virus Spread	It is possible to spread the virus 1 day before symptoms appear and may be most contagious during the initial 3-4 days and remain contagious for about 7 days. People with weakened immune systems can be contagious longer.	<p>It's possible to spread the viruses for at least one day before experiencing any symptoms. It can spread by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person-to-person contact • In poorly ventilated spaces • Droplets or aerosols released through coughing, sneezing or talking 	Likely most contagious within the first 5 days. COVID-19 is more contagious among certain populations and age groups than flu.
High Risk for Severe Illness		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older adults • Persons with chronic conditions (asthma, diabetes, neurological disorders, etc.) • Pregnant persons • Immunocompromised persons • Persons with metabolic disorders 	

	Flu	Similarities	COVID-19
Complications		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pneumonia • Respiratory failure • Acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) • Sepsis • Cardiac injury • Multiple-organ failure • Worsening of chronic medical conditions • Secondary bacterial infections • Blood clots 	Long COVID
Protection	There are multiple influenza vaccines to protect against the 3 or 4 flu viruses expected to circulate each year.	It generally takes 2 weeks after vaccination for protection against the viruses.	Three COVID-19 vaccines are available in the U.S. People ages 5 years and older should receive the updated COVID-19 vaccination. Check with your provider or pharmacist—additional doses may be needed based on your health, chronic conditions or immune response.
Approved Treatments		Antivirals	Monoclonal antibodies

Additional Resources



[Flu Symptoms & Complications | CDC](#)



[How Flu Spreads | CDC](#)



[Underlying Conditions and the Higher Risk for Severe COVID-19 | CDC](#)



[What You Should Know About Influenza \(Flu\) Antiviral Drugs | CDC](#)



[Symptoms of COVID-19 | CDC](#)



[How COVID-19 Spreads | CDC](#)



[Information for the 2024-2025 Flu Season | CDC](#)



[Types of COVID-19 Treatment | CDC](#)



[Key Facts About Influenza \(Flu\) | CDC](#)



[People at Higher Risk of Flu Complications | CDC](#)



[COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC](#)



[Staying Up to Date with COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC](#)