

An Important Update from the Infection Prevention Team

COVID-19 Meets Flu Season

What to know and what to do to best protect yourself and our clients

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Influenza (Flu) and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses¹. They have many similarities and some important differences. Since many of their symptoms are similar, it may be hard to tell them apart. The following will help you understand what features the two viruses have in common, and which are unique to each.

Symptoms

Common to both: Fever or feeling feverish/chills, cough, fatigue (tiredness), sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle pain or body aches, headache, or diarrhea and vomiting (more common in young children with influenza). New onset of shortness of breath or difficulty breathing has been reported with COVID-19 infection. These symptoms can also occur with influenza infection, but are usually seen among those with severe illness or other complications of influenza, such as pneumonia. For both viruses, symptoms can range from no symptoms (asymptomatic) to severe. It's important to note that it is possible to spread the flu or COVID-19 when you are asymptomatic. Change in or loss of taste or smell is also common to both, although this is more frequent with COVID-19.



High-risk groups

Common to both: Older adults, people with certain underlying medical conditions, and pregnant women.

Transmission

Common to both: Both COVID-19 and flu 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 large and small particles containing virus that are expelled when people with the illness (COVID-19 or flu) cough, sneeze, or talk. These particles can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby and possibly be inhaled into the lungs. In some circumstances, such as indoor settings with poor ventilation, small particles might be spread further than 6 feet and cause infections.



Although most spread is by inhalation, it may be possible that a person can get infected by touching another person (for example, shaking hands with someone who has the virus on their hands), or by touching a surface or object that has virus on it, and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes.

Both flu viruses and the virus that causes COVID-19 can be spread to others by people before they begin showing symptoms; by people with very mild symptoms; and by people who never experience symptoms (asymptomatic people).

Differences:

While the viruses that causes COVID-19 and flu are thought to spread in similar ways, the COVID-19 virus is generally more contagious than flu viruses. Also, COVID-19 has been observed to have more superspreading events than flu. This means the virus that causes COVID-19 can quickly and easily spread to a lot of people and result in continual spreading among people as time progresses.



Contagious period

COVID-19 only: Most people who become infected with COVID-19 develop symptoms within 5 days. However, symptoms can develop anywhere from 2-14 days after initial infection. A person infected with COVID-19 may be contagious to others beginning 48 hours before symptoms develop and may remain contagious for up to 10 days after symptoms first appear. People with severe illness or people with weakened immune systems can be contagious for up to 20 days from when symptoms first appear.

Flu only: Most people infected with the flu develop symptoms within 1 to 4 days. Those infected with the flu can be contagious to others beginning one day before symptoms develop. They are most contagious during the initial 3-4 days of their illness, but many remain contagious for about 5-7 days after symptoms begin. Children and people with weakened immune systems may pass the virus for longer than 7 days.

Complications

Common to both: Both COVID-19 and flu can result in complications, especially among those at high risk. Some complications include pneumonia, sepsis, or organ failure.



COVID-19 only: COVID-19 can also cause life-threatening blood clots in the veins and arteries of the lungs, heart, legs, or brain.



Recovery

COVID-19 only: The recovery timeframe for COVID-19 can vary depending upon severity of illness, but most people experience improved symptoms within 10 days.

Flu only: Most people with the flu will recover in a few days to less than two weeks.

Protect yourself with a flu shot!

The best way to protect yourself against the flu is to get vaccinated. It is a simple step you can take to protect yourself, your loved ones, and others in the community. There are multiple, safe influenza vaccines produced annually, including a special high-dose vaccine for people 65 and over.

The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months or older get a flu vaccine by the end of October.

Getting a flu vaccine is more important than ever during 2021-2022 to protect yourself and the people around you from flu, and to help reduce the strain on health care systems responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. If we can keep more people healthy this winter, we can ensure that resources are available to care for those who are critically ill from influenza, COVID-19, or other serious medical conditions.

Are flu vaccines safe?

Yes. For more than 50 years, hundreds of millions of Americans have safely received seasonal flu vaccines. Getting a flu vaccine is an essential part of protecting your own and your family's health this season—as well as the health of our medically fragile and at-risk clients!

What to do if you're not sure if you have the flu, COVID-19, or something else

Contact your local office and physician to discuss your concerns and follow their advice regarding testing, treatment, and symptom management.

¹ COVID-19 is caused by infection with a new coronavirus (called SARS-CoV-2), and flu is caused by infection with influenza viruses.