Family Physician FAQs: COVID-19 or the Flu?

Updated September 10, 2021

What causes COVID-19 and the flu?

- COVID-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus which has multiple variants that arise due to uncontrolled spread of the virus (e.g., Alpha, Delta).
- Seasonal flu can be caused by different subtypes of Influenza A or Influenza B viruses. Due to the structure of the virus, they naturally vary each year, which requires annual vaccinations to provide the best protection.

Can I get both viruses at the same time?

- You can be infected with both SARS-CoV-2 and Influenza A and B viruses at the same time, so it's very important to get your flu shot as well as your COVID-19 vaccine.

> **Key Takeaways**
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> 1. The flu shot *does not* give you the flu.
> 2. Vaccines reduce your risk for severe illness and complications.
> 3. It's safe to get the COVID-19 vaccine at the same time as your flu shot.

When do symptoms appear?

- Typically, COVID-19 symptoms appear 3-5 days after exposure to the virus. Symptoms can appear as early as 2 days or as late as 14 days after infection.
- With the flu virus, a person typically develops symptoms 1-4 days after infection.

What are the major symptoms?

- COVID-19 has a wide range of symptoms. These symptoms may indicate infection: fever, cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, loss of taste or smell, nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, sore throat, runny/stuffy nose.
- People with influenza (flu) often feel some or all of these symptoms: fever, cough, sore throat, runny/stuffy nose, muscle body aches, headache, fatigue, vomiting and diarrhea.

Who is more likely to have serious complications from the disease?

- **COVID-19:** Older adults and those with heart disease, lung disease or diabetes seem to be at higher risk of serious complications from COVID-19. Right now, the group at biggest risk for hospitalization and severe disease are individuals who are not yet vaccinated.
- **Flu:** Adults over 65 and older people of any age with certain chronic medical conditions (asthma, diabetes, heart disease), pregnant women, and children younger than 5 are at increased risk from the flu.

How long am I contagious?

- For both COVID-19 and the flu, it is possible to spread the virus to others before experiencing any symptoms.

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- People can spread COVID-19 for about 2 days before experiencing signs or symptoms and remain contagious for at least 10 days after signs or symptoms first appear.
- People with the flu are usually contagious one day before showing symptoms and remain contagious for about 7 days.

Do I need to get tested for both flu and COVID-19?
- If you are symptomatic, talk with your family physician about getting tested for both COVID-19 and flu. It will be important to stay home from work and/or school as well as physically distance and wear a mask to prevent spread of either virus to others. You may be required to show a negative COVID-19 test before returning to work or school once your symptoms have resolved.

Can I get vaccinated for COVID-19 and flu at the same time?
- Yes! Co-administration of the COVID-19 vaccines with other routine immunizations, like the flu shot, is okay as these vaccines are safe and effective.

What are the complications from COVID-19 and the flu?
- COVID-19 and flu share many complications like pneumonia, respiratory failure, infections in the blood (sepsis), kidney failure, among others.
- Additional COVID-19 complications include blood clots in the veins and arteries of the lungs, heart, legs, or brain, and Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in children.

Is there treatment for COVID-19 or the flu?
- There is no one treatment for COVID-19 and no drugs are currently approved by the FDA for treatment. There is a treatment that can be given for post-exposure prophylaxis in certain situations.
- There are prescription drugs approved to treat Influenza.

Are there tests for COVID-19 and the flu?
- There are several tests for COVID-19. Some require a nasal swab, others require saliva samples, and others require a blood test.
- Flu tests are typically done in the physician's office using a nasal swab.
    - [Additional flu testing information from the CDC](#)

Is there a vaccine?
- Currently, there are three vaccines for COVID-19: Two are under emergency use authorization and one has been licensed by the FDA.
- There are several FDA-licensed influenza vaccines that can be administered annually to protect against flu.
    - None of the vaccines give you COVID-19 or the flu.
- Getting vaccinated against both COVID-19 and the flu is best way to reduce the risks for severe illness and complications.

Resources
- CDC resource: [Similarities and Differences between Flu and COVID-19](#)
- AAFP vaccine resources, including the 2021-2022 influenza vaccine recommendations: [aafp.org/vaccines](#)
- Patient education resource on familydoctor.org: ["Do I have COVID-19 or the Flu?"](#)