



Guide to Creating a COVID-19 and Influenza (Flu) Action Plan: Adults 65 Years and Older

Influenza (flu) and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory infections, but they are caused by different viruses. COVID-19 is caused by infection with a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. The flu is caused by infection with an influenza virus. Adults 65 years and older are at especially high risk of serious complications if they get the flu and/or COVID-19.

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) recommends that you create an action plan for the flu and COVID-19. An action plan is a summary of steps you can take to protect yourself and your loved ones from the viruses that cause these infections. This guide will help you make a plan to prevent the flu and/or COVID-19. It will also help you prepare for an unexpected illness.

Gathering key information about your medical history with COVID-19 and the flu is a good first step when you are developing your action plan. Completing a medical history form is one way to do this.

PREVENTION

The AAFP and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that all eligible individuals six months and older get a flu vaccine every year. This is the first and most important step to protect against flu viruses. Flu vaccines reduce the number of people who get seriously ill, are hospitalized, or die from the flu each year.

COVID-19 vaccination is recommended for all eligible individuals six months and older. The COVID-19 vaccines available in the United States are safe and effective. They protect people from serious illness, hospitalization, and even death from COVID-19. You can get the best protection by staying up to date with the recommended number of doses and boosters.

Flu

- A flu shot protects you and your loved ones from most strains of the influenza virus.
- For adults 65 years and older, a high-dose flu vaccine or an adjuvanted flu vaccine is recommended. An adjuvanted vaccine includes an ingredient that helps create a stronger immune response.
- It is important to avoid close contact with people who are sick; stay home when you are sick; cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing; and wash your hands often to prevent germs.

COVID-19

- The COVID-19 vaccine is different from the flu vaccine.
- Individuals are considered up to date with COVID-19 vaccination when they have completed a primary series and received the most recent booster dose recommended for them by the CDC.
- It is important to stay home when you are sick. Wear a mask or respirator when you are sick or caring for someone who is sick. Older adults and people who have certain medical conditions should consider wearing a mask in public spaces, even if they are vaccinated against COVID-19.

SYMPTOMS

The flu and COVID-19 can have similar symptoms. Contact your family doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Sore throat
- Diarrhea (more frequent in children with the flu, but can occur at any age with COVID-19)
- Change in or loss of taste or smell (more frequent with COVID-19)
- Muscle pain or body aches
- Headache
- Vomiting
- Runny or stuffy nose

TESTING

Get tested right away if you have symptoms of the flu and/or COVID-19. Talk with your family doctor or another health care professional about the right testing option based on your symptoms, age, and health condition(s). If you don't have a family doctor, now is a great time to establish care with one. They can help you with all your health needs, including prevention and treatment of illnesses like the flu and COVID-19.

Flu	COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An at-home combination test that can detect COVID-19, the flu, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is available. It is a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. • Influenza diagnostic tests are performed by health care professionals. Another test called the CDC Influenza SARS-CoV-2 Multiplex Assay is also performed by health care professionals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viral laboratory tests are performed in a medical office or at a testing site. Contact your family doctor or look for a community-based testing site near you at www.hhs.gov/coronavirus/community-based-testing-sites/index.html. • Viral rapid tests can be used for self-testing. A list of authorized tests is available on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website at www.fda.gov/medical-devices/coronavirus-covid-19-and-medical-devices/home-otc-covid-19-diagnostic-tests. • You can buy at-home rapid tests online or in pharmacies and retail stores. Your local health department may offer free tests. • Medicare Part B will cover up to eight free self-tests each calendar month from participating pharmacies, clinicians, and health care facilities. This coverage includes those enrolled in a Medicare Advantage plan. Private health insurance may also reimburse the cost of buying at-home tests.

WHAT TO EXPECT IF YOU ARE INFECTED

One or more days can pass from the time you get COVID-19 or the flu to the time you start having symptoms of illness. It is possible to be infected with the COVID-19 virus without having any symptoms. This is called being asymptomatic. It is also possible to be infected with a flu virus without having any symptoms.

Flu	COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fever and aches should end within five days. Cough and fatigue/feeling tired or not having energy may last about two weeks. • Talk with your family doctor if your symptoms get worse. • Severe cases of the flu can lead to hospitalization or death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you test positive for COVID-19, you should isolate for five days or longer. The length of the isolation period will depend on your symptoms and whether you have a fever or not. • Some people who have COVID-19 may never have symptoms. For mild to moderate cases, symptoms can last up to two weeks. For more severe cases, symptoms may last up to six weeks. • COVID-19 infection may lead to long COVID (long-term effects from the infection), hospitalization, or death.

TREATMENT

If you test positive for the flu or COVID-19, don't wait to start treatment. Treatment must start within days of the first symptoms to be effective. The FDA has authorized certain prescription medicines to treat the flu and COVID-19. The following information will help you plan to receive treatment in a timely manner.

Flu	COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CDC has recommended four FDA-approved antiviral medicines to treat the flu this season: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Oseltamivir (available as a generic version or under the brand name Tamiflu) – Zanamivir (brand name: Relenza) – Peramivir (brand name: Rapivab) – Baloxavir (brand name: Xofluza) Antiviral medicines can lessen fever and other flu symptoms when treatment is started within two days of becoming sick. They can also shorten the time you are sick by about one day. For people at higher risk of serious flu complications, early treatment with an antiviral medicine can mean having milder illness instead of more severe illness that might require a hospital stay. For adults hospitalized with the flu, some studies have reported that early antiviral treatment can reduce their risk of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The FDA has authorized certain antiviral medicines and monoclonal antibodies to treat mild to moderate COVID-19. Antiviral medicines target specific parts of the virus to stop it from multiplying in the body. This helps to prevent severe illness and death. If you are at risk for severe COVID-19 and have tested positive for COVID-19 within the past five days, talk with your family doctor about whether taking an antiviral pill is right for you. Two options are available: nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (brand name: Paxlovid) and molnupiravir (brand name: Lagevrio). Monoclonal antibodies (mAb) can help the immune system recognize and respond more effectively to the virus. This treatment may help people who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Are at high risk of serious symptoms – Tested positive for COVID-19 with symptoms within the past seven days – Have been in contact with someone who has recently tested positive One option called bebtelovimab is available. Talk to your family doctor about whether mAb treatment is right for you. If you don't have a family doctor, look for a Test to Treat location near you at https://aspr.hhs.gov/TestToTreat. You can also contact your local community health center or health department.

COMPLICATIONS

Have a plan ready in case you develop complications after you get the flu and/or COVID-19. Most people who get the flu and/or COVID-19 will recover in a few days to less than two weeks. But some people who are at higher risk, especially adults 65 years and older, may develop complications of these illnesses (for example, pneumonia). Some of the complications can be life-threatening and even cause death.

Flu	COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serious complications triggered by the flu can include inflammation of the heart (myocarditis), brain (encephalitis), or muscle tissue (myositis, rhabdomyolysis). Multi-organ failure (for example, respiratory and kidney failure) is another potential complication. Flu virus infection of the respiratory tract can trigger an extreme inflammatory response in the body. It can even lead to sepsis, the body's life-threatening response to infection. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you are hospitalized with COVID-19, your doctor might use other types of treatment (for example, antiviral medicines and steroids), depending on how sick you are. This could include medicines to treat the virus, reduce an overactive immune response, or treat COVID-19 complications. People who have been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 may experience long-term effects from their infection. These are known as post-COVID conditions or long COVID. COVID-19 may cause lung complications, such as pneumonia. In very severe cases, it may cause acute respiratory distress syndrome.

RECOVERY

Most patients will recover from acute COVID-19 illness within four weeks. However, some people will continue to have ongoing symptoms after this phase. Others will have new or recurrent symptoms and conditions.

It is recommended that people with the flu stay home for at least 24 hours after their fever is gone. The fever should be gone without the use of fever-reducing medicine.

If you have complications from the flu or COVID-19 and/or need to be hospitalized, it is important to have a plan in place to support your recovery process. This will slow down the spread of COVID-19 and the flu and help you regain your health.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The CDC offers a variety of helpful resources, including the following:

- A downloadable care plan form to help you summarize your health conditions and current treatment: www.cdc.gov/aging/caregiving/pdf/Complete-Care-Plan-Form-508.pdf
- Information about seeking treatment if you have COVID-19 and are at high risk of getting very sick: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html
- COVID-19 recommendations for older adults: www.cdc.gov/aging/covid19-guidance.html
- A factsheet about why people 65 years and older need a flu shot: www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/freeresources/seniors/seniors-vaccination-factsheet-final.pdf

When to Contact Your Doctor

Contact your family doctor if you have any signs or symptoms of the flu or COVID-19. Explain your condition and follow your doctor's advice for testing and treatment.