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.

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.

Key Takeaways
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.
• 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.
  o 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.
  o 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?”