

KEY POINTS

- Symptoms of COVID-19 and flu overlap
- COVID-19 and flu have key differences that can suggest one illness over the other
- Testing may be needed to tell these illnesses apart
- People can have both illnesses at the same time

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COVID-19 and Influenza *What's Different and What's the Same?*

COVID-19 and flu (influenza) are both viral respiratory infections that can have similar symptoms. When both flu and COVID-19 are widespread in the community, testing will often be needed to tell them apart. However, COVID-19 and flu do have some important differences.

Below we review *what's the same and what's different* when it comes to COVID-19 and the flu. Each section will include key questions that are answered by a comparison graph.

Symptoms

- *Are there any symptoms that are more common with COVID-19?*
- *How long after exposure do symptoms start with COVID-19 as compared to the flu?*

	Both	COVID-19	Influenza
Cough	Yes		
Fatigue	Yes		
Fever	Yes		
Headache	Yes		
Loss of taste & smell		Common	Uncommon
Muscle aches	Yes		
Runny or stuffy nose	Yes		
Shortness of breath	Yes		
Sore throat	Yes		
Symptom onset after infection		2 to 15 days, but most often 5 days	Usually 1 to 4 days

Key Points

- COVID-19 is suggested by a longer time from exposure to symptom onset and by loss of taste and smell.
- Although less common, loss of taste and smell can happen with the flu.

How it Is Spread

- Can people spread both COVID-19 and the flu (contagious) before they have any symptoms?

	Both	COVID-19	Influenza
Is it contagious before symptoms start?		Yes: 2 days before symptoms	Yes: 1 day before symptoms
How long after symptoms start is it contagious?		At least 10 days	7 days
How is it spread?	Mainly by droplets		
Distance	Usually spreads when people are in close contact (up to about 6 feet apart)		

Key Points

- A person with COVID-19 can spread the illness for a longer period of time than the flu.
- Both COVID-19 and flu can be spread by people that do not have any symptoms (i.e., asymptomatic).

Complications

- Are there differences in the complications of COVID-19 versus the flu?

	Both	COVID-19	Influenza
Blood clots		May be increased	
Mortality (death rate)		About 1-3% (much higher than flu)	About 0.1%
Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C)		Yes. This rare illness causes inflammation of multiple organs (e.g., brain, heart, kidney, lungs, skin)	
Onset of Complications		Typically starts in second week of illness	Typically starts within 1 week of illness onset
Organ failure	Yes		
Pneumonia	Yes		
Respiratory failure	Yes		
Sepsis	Yes		

Key Points

- Death rate is higher in COVID-19 than seasonal flu (at least 10 times higher). COVID-19 is associated with MIS-C and may increase blood clots.
- Severe complications often start later in COVID-19 compared to the flu.

High Risk Groups

- *Are young healthy children at higher or lower risk of complications from the flu compared to COVID-19?*
- *What other groups are at higher risk?*

	Both	COVID-19	Influenza
Certain chronic conditions (e.g., heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, diabetes)	Higher risk		
Certain racial/ethnic groups	Higher risk		
Elderly	Higher risk		
Nursing home and long-term care facilities	Higher risk		
Pregnancy	Higher risk		
Weak immune system	Higher risk		
Healthy young children		Lower risk	Higher risk (especially those <2 years)

Key Points

- The elderly and those with chronic health conditions are at high risk for complications from both illnesses.
- Healthy young children have a lower risk of complications from COVID-19 compared to the flu. However, children with chronic health conditions are at high risk for COVID-19 complications.

Treatment and Prevention

- Does physical distancing work for both flu and COVID-19?

	Both	COVID-19	Influenza
Medications		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remdesivir for hospitalized patients • Antibody therapy (e.g., bamlanivimab) 	Flu antivirals: Important for those at high risk for complications or those that are very sick
Physical distancing, handwashing, masks	Can prevent both flu and COVID-19		
Supportive care	Important for both		
Vaccine		Moderna and Pfizer Vaccines approved in December 2020.	Yes: Very important prevention measure

Key Points

- Get the flu vaccine!
- Get the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available!
- Physical distancing, hand hygiene and using masks can help prevent both illnesses.

Some Final Thoughts

- ✓ Remember that people can become ill with BOTH COVID-19 and other respiratory infections at the same time, including flu (i.e., coinfection).
- ✓ Triage nurses should use their clinical judgment, but generally will want to use the *COVID-19 Diagnosed or Suspected* guideline when a patient calls with typical COVID-19 symptoms and there is community spread.
- ✓ During the 2020-2021 influenza season, triage nurses can use the *COVID-19 Diagnosed or Suspected* guideline. We have included triage questions related to influenza as part of this updated COVID-19 guideline.
- ✓ An exception would be the patient who has flu-like symptoms and has had a definite close exposure to someone with influenza (flu test positive). In this case use the *Influenza* guideline.
- ✓ COVID-19 is still a new illness. Our understanding of symptoms, complications and treatment are changing rapidly. Good sources of up-to-date information includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov>) and the World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int/>).

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