

## **How to Tell if Your Symptoms Are Covid-19 or the Flu**

Influenza or Covid-19? Both illnesses have very similar symptoms—but there are ways to tell them apart.

Flu season will likely add to the damage Covid-19 continues to inflict. That's why it's especially important that you learn the difference between Covid-19 symptoms vs. flu symptoms.

Different viruses cause each illness, but the symptoms (such as fever, cough, fatigue, and body aches) are remarkably similar, making it difficult for patients and doctors alike to know the difference. Being able to tell the two illnesses apart is important because it can impact how they're managed and because each disease progresses differently, says Natasha Bhuyan, MD, a family practice physician with One Medical in Phoenix. This is what you need to know about what's similar and what's different between symptoms of Covid-19 and the flu.

### **A pattern of symptoms**

While the symptoms of the flu vs. Covid-19 may not be that different, an August 2020 study in *Frontiers in Public Health* suggests that the order in which symptoms appear may help people tell them apart. The authors analyzed World Health Organization (WHO) data on almost 56,000 Covid-19 patients then, using a model based on the Google algorithm, predicted that the order in which symptoms appeared was slightly different in Covid-19 than with influenza. This was the same regardless of how severe the illnesses were, the study stated.

"The most important part of this work is that there's an order [to the symptoms]," says study co-author Peter Kuhn, PhD, Dean's professor of biological sciences and professor of medicine at the University of Southern California. The team is looking for larger sets of data to see if differences in the pattern of symptoms affect how severe the disease is

### **Covid-19 symptoms**

The study found that Covid-19 is more likely to start with a fever (like other coronavirus-related diseases), then progress to a cough, and, finally, nausea/vomiting and diarrhea. The researchers focused on these four symptoms because they are easier to measure, although they did additional analyses on sore throat, body aches, and headache, which people experience as symptoms of Covid-19 and the flu.

#### Fever

The first symptom to appear is also the most common symptom among Covid-19 patients, reported by 87.9 percent of patients in the WHO sample. It may start as a low-grade fever (beginning at 38 degrees Celsius) then get worse over time, or it can come and go. People who have fever from other illnesses and those who have fever from Covid-19 will often have chills, as well.

#### Cough

In Kuhn's study, cough was usually the second symptom to appear and, according to WHO data, it's the second most common symptom, affecting more than two-thirds (67.7 percent) of that sample. Covid-19 coughs tend to be dry.

#### Sore throat, body aches, and headache

In the *Frontiers* study, these symptoms were the most likely to occur next, although they were much

less frequent than the first two. In the WHO report, about 14 percent of Covid-19 patients reported each of these symptoms.

#### Nausea and vomiting

Not that many Covid-19 patients experience nausea and vomiting, but if the symptoms do happen, the study researchers found they usually appeared after the fever and cough—and before diarrhea. An April 2020 study in the American Journal of Gastroenterology found that people with digestive symptoms (not just nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea but also lack of appetite and abdominal pain) were common and became worse with more severe disease.

#### Diarrhea

Another less common symptom of Covid-19, diarrhea tended to appear last. Diarrhea as a symptom is a bit concerning for infectious disease experts: People with Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)—which originated in Saudi Arabia in 2012—who developed diarrhea as the first symptom seemed to develop a more severe form of the disease. But Kuhn cautions that no one yet knows if this is the case with Covid-19.

#### Loss of taste and smell

The study did not look specifically at this symptom but, according to Dr. Bhuyan, some 65 to 80 percent of patients with Covid-19 will lose their sense of taste or smell. This is unlikely to occur with the flu, although it can happen with other viruses, she adds. This is what it's like to lose your sense of taste and smell due to Covid-19.

### **Flu symptoms**

The Frontiers study authors noted that the pattern of symptoms for influenza was the same as that for Covid-19 with one important exception: The order of the first two symptoms to appear was reversed. A cough tends to hit people with the flu first, followed by a fever. “Influenza starts off with a cough on average, followed by fever, followed by gastrointestinal symptoms,” says Dr. Kuhn.

#### Cough

Flu symptoms, including a cough, tend to come on more suddenly typically within one to four days of being infected, says Dr. Bhuyan. With Covid-19, cough and other symptoms appear two to 14 days after being infected.

#### Fever

With the flu, fever can go as high as 39 or 40 degrees Celsius; it will usually go away in three to seven days, but the cough can last for more than two weeks, says the CDC. A headache and sore throat may come on about the same time, reports the study. Also, headaches are more common with influenza than Covid-19.

#### Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea

Children are more likely than adults to have nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea from the flu, says the CDC.

#### Runny nose and nasal congestion

Both of these symptoms are very unlikely with Covid-19 but can be common with influenza, says Dr. Bhuyan. You're also more likely to see sneezing with the flu than Covid-19.

### **How to prevent Covid-19 and Flu**

There's no vaccine for Covid-19 yet so the best way to prevent it is to wear a mask, keep your

distance from other people and wash your hands frequently (preferably with soap and water). In fact, all of these measures provide a triple advantage, says Dr. Matthay. “It will reduce Covid-19 spread, reduce the chances of influenza transmission, and reduce the risk of the common cold,” he explains. If you’re sick, stay home. “This year, it’s more critical that anyone with symptoms stay at home to prevent further spread,” says Dr. Bhuyan.

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