

Coronavirus Disease 2019 vs. the Flu

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This comparative analysis by a prominent physician and scholar should reassure people. The media fear campaign tends to describe COV-19 as a dangerous and life threatening infection.

Influenza (the flu) and COVID-19, the illness caused by the new [coronavirus](#), are both infectious respiratory illnesses. Although the symptoms of COVID-19 and the flu can look similar, the two illnesses are caused by different viruses.

[Lisa Maragakis, M.D., M.P.H.](#), senior director of infection prevention at Johns Hopkins, explains how the flu and COVID-19 are similar and how they are different.

Similarities: COVID-19 and the Flu

Symptoms

- Both cause fever, cough, body aches and fatigue; sometimes vomiting and diarrhea.
- Can be mild or severe, even fatal in rare cases.
- Can result in pneumonia.

Transmission

- Both can be spread from person to person through droplets in the air from an infected person coughing, sneezing or talking.
- A possible difference: COVID-19 might be spread through the airborne route (see details below under Differences).
- Both can be spread by an infected person for several days before their symptoms appear.

Treatment

- Neither virus is treatable with antibiotics, which only work on bacterial infections.
- Both are treated by addressing symptoms, such as reducing fever. Severe cases may require hospitalization and support such as mechanical ventilation.

Prevention

Both may be [prevented](#) by frequent, thorough hand washing, coughing into the crook of

your elbow, staying home when sick and limiting contact with people who are infected. [Social and physical distancing](#) can limit the spread of COVID-19 in communities.

Differences: COVID-19 and the Flu

Cause

COVID-19: Caused by one virus, the novel 2019 coronavirus, now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or SARS-CoV-2.

Flu: Caused by any of several different types and strains of influenza viruses.

Transmission

While both the flu and COVID-19 may be transmitted in similar ways (see the Similarities section above), there is also a possible difference: COVID-19 might be spread through the airborne route, meaning that tiny droplets remaining in the air could cause disease in others even after the ill person is no longer near.

Antiviral Medications

COVID-19: Antiviral medications and other therapies are currently being tested to see if they can address symptoms.

Flu: Antiviral medications can address symptoms and sometimes shorten the duration of the illness.

Vaccine

COVID-19: No vaccine is available at this time, though it is in progress.

Flu: A vaccine is available and effective to prevent some of the most dangerous types or to reduce the severity of the flu.

Infections

COVID-19: Approximately 1,131,713 cases worldwide; 278,458 cases in the U.S. as of Apr. 4, 2020.[1]

Flu: Estimated 1 billion cases worldwide; 9.3 million to 45 million cases in the U.S. per year.

Deaths

COVID-19: Approximately 59,884 deaths reported worldwide; 7,159 deaths in the U.S., as of Apr. 4, 2020.*

Flu: 291,000 to 646,000 deaths worldwide; 12,000 to 61,000 deaths in the U.S. per year.

The COVID-19 situation is changing rapidly. Since this disease is caused by a new virus, people do not have immunity to it, and a vaccine may be many months away. Doctors and scientists are working on estimating the mortality rate of COVID-19, but at present, it is thought to be higher than that of most strains of the flu.

*

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Note

[1] This information comes from the [Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases map developed by the Johns Hopkins Center for Systems Science and Engineering](#).

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