

# Differences Between the Flu and COVID-19

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This information is from [this Public Health Ontario document](#). This article is a general overview, so some parts of the original document are not included. If you have other questions, click [here](#) to see if they are in the original document.

When there is an outbreak, sometimes more than one virus is identified, and sometimes they can't identify which virus caused it.

The flu (also known as the influenza virus) and SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) are different diseases, but they can be hard to tell apart because they have very similar signs and symptoms.

## What are some common symptoms?

The flu: You develop a fever quickly (also called “sudden onset fever”), as well as a cough, chills, headache, fatigue, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle pain, or body aches.

COVID-19: The same symptoms as the flu, but being short of breath is also very common. It's possible to have other symptoms, including losing your sense of taste and smell. It's also common to have gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

## What are more severe symptoms/complications?

The flu: Pneumonia, underlying medical conditions can get worse, sepsis, heart issues (also called “cardiac involvement”), nervous system issues (also called “neurologic involvement”), and death.

COVID-19: The same symptoms as the flu, and shortness of breath is also very common. It's possible to have blood clots in lungs, heart, legs or brain and multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MISC), multisystem inflammatory syndrome in adults (MIS-A), Long COVID, and death.

## Can someone spread the virus when they don't have any symptoms?

The flu: Yes.

COVID-19: Yes.

## **How long does it take for people to spread the virus to others?**

The flu: You can spread the flu to others 1 day before you get symptoms and about 5 to 10 days after you get symptoms. You are the most likely to spread the virus 24 to 48 hours after you start having symptoms.

COVID-19: For people who are not immunocompromised, you can spread the flu to others 2 to 3 days before symptoms and about 10 days after you get symptoms. This period can be longer for people who are immunocompromised.

## **How long does it take for someone to develop symptoms after being exposed to the virus?**

The flu: 1 to 4 days

COVID-19: Anywhere between 1 to 14 days, average: 5 to 6 days. For COVID-19 variants of concern, new evidence suggests that this time period can even be shorter.

## **Final Thoughts**

If you have symptoms and you're unsure if you have the flu or COVID-19, click [here](#) to take a COVID-19 self-assessment. If you're not feeling well, somebody else can take it for you.\* You will get a recommendation on what to do next.\*

It's important to know that this self-assessment tool cannot diagnose you.\* Anyone who is sick or has any symptoms of illness, including those not listed in this screening tool, should stay home and seek assessment from a health care provider if needed.\* Consult a health care provider if you have medical questions.\*

If anyone has COVID-19 symptoms or is waiting for test results after experiencing symptoms, everyone in your household must stay home while they are in isolation.\*

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at [www.ontario.ca/coronavirus](http://www.ontario.ca/coronavirus). Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675