

Your flu and COVID-19 questions answered by an Aetna Medical Director



As COVID-19 continues to affect people in every country, it can be easy to overlook flu, another highly contagious and potentially dangerous respiratory condition. We spoke to Dr Nairah Rasul-Syed, vHealth Medical Director and Family Medicine Consultant, to get answers to some key questions and to find out how best to protect against both of these viral illnesses.

Q: Will this flu season be bad? Flu rates in the Southern Hemisphere in 2020 have been historically low, perhaps due to COVID-19 safety measures. However, regardless of governmental lockdown policies, people are still at risk. What's more, flu plus COVID-19 can be a deadly combination. There's a lot people can do to protect themselves and their community.

Q: How do I know if I'm symptomatic for flu or COVID-19? Both illnesses are contagious respiratory illnesses that present with similar symptoms and therefore without a test, it may be hard to tell the difference. Common symptoms of both viruses include: Fever >37.5C | Cough | Shortness of breath | Fatigue and muscle ache | Runny or stuffy nose. See page 2 for more detail on how to tell the difference between the two diseases.

Q: What should I do if I can't get a vaccine this season? With significant pressures on health care systems, some countries and health services are low on vaccines. If you can't get vaccinated, follow our flu guidance on the flyer 'vHealth Medical Director's top 10 ways to help avoid flu during the COVID-19 pandemic'.

Q: Who should be vaccinated and when? Everyone should get vaccinated now. It takes about two weeks after vaccination for your body to develop protective antibodies. It is especially important for people at high risk of complications to get vaccinated: Older adults > age 65yrs | Health workers | Pregnant women | Children

aged between 6 months and 5 years | Individuals with chronic health conditions (e.g. diabetes) | Anyone else who lives with or cares for high risk individuals. Alternate vaccines are available for people with egg allergies. Talk with your doctor if you have concerns.

Q: Can the vaccine give me flu? No. Vaccines contain dead or attenuated (weakened) viruses, which prompt your body to strengthen its defences. You may experience mild side effects, such as soreness at the injection site, muscle aches and low-grade fever or headache but these usually resolve after a few days.

Q: Which flu vaccine should I get? All Influenza vaccines are designed to reduce the chance of infection and illness from the common 3 or 4 viruses known to be common to flu season, however the exact type of vaccine available, might vary in different regions. Speak to your local doctor to find out what vaccines are available, and which one is most appropriate for you.

Q: Will a flu vaccine protect me against COVID-19? No. All Influenza vaccines are designed to reduce the chance of infection and illness from the common 3 or 4 viruses known (depending on vaccine) to be common to flu season. Although such vaccines do not eliminate the risk of Influenza infection entirely, studies do show that vaccines can reduce the risk of infection across the overall population by as much as 60% depending on how closely matched the circulating viruses are to the vaccine. Since the COVID-19 virus is different to flu viruses, the flu vaccine cannot protect against COVID-19. Even so, the Influenza vaccine has many benefits including: Reduced risk of infection with Influenza virus | Reduced severity of symptoms in those with Influenza | Reduced risk of complications and hospitalisations, especially in high risk persons | Can be life-saving in young children with developing immune systems | Protects others around you, especially high risk and vulnerable people.

How to tell if I have flu or COVID-19?³

Influenza and COVID-19 are both contagious respiratory illnesses caused by viruses. They also share many symptoms, which can make them hard to distinguish. Diagnostic testing can help. Here are important similarities and differences.

Symptoms:

Common symptoms of both viruses include: Fever >37.5C | Cough | Shortness of breath | Fatigue and muscle ache | Runny or stuffy nose. For both COVID-19 and Influenza, a person might not develop symptoms until 1-2 days after infection, but in COVID-19, it could take even longer, even as late as 14 days after infection.

Similarities: Symptoms include difficulty breathing, sore throat or cough, runny or stuffy nose, fever or chills, muscle pains or body aches, headache, fever. (This list is not exhaustive. Please consult your doctor for further guidance.) **Differences:** COVID-19 symptoms can cause more severe symptoms in some people and some people develop a change in or loss of taste and smell.

How They Spread

Similarities: Influenza and COVID-19 infection commonly spreads through droplets in the air when expelled by coughing, sneezing or through contaminated hands with influenza virus. Transmission is rapid in crowded areas,

and can spread up to one meter. **Differences:** The COVID-19 virus seems to spread more easily from person to person.

Timing

Similarities: You can spread either virus a day or more before experiencing symptoms. **Differences:** For both COVID-19 and Influenza, a person might not develop symptoms until 1-2 days after infection, but in COVID-19,

it could take even longer, even as late as 14 days after infection, so people are more likely to spread the virus before they know they're sick.

This year, protecting yourself from flu is more important than ever, and we are here to help. As an Aetna International member, you can call us using the number on the back of your member ID card. Download the [vHealth by Aetna app](#)^{**}. Log in to the [Health Hub](#), your secure member website, to find out more about vHealth*, to contact the Aetna CARE team to ask health care questions or to search our directory of in-network hospitals or clinics. In Dubai? Download and log in to the [vHealth \(Dubai\) app](#), contact the tollfree number on 8000 35704672 or email support@vhealth.co.ae^{**}. In Thailand? Download the [vHealth \(Thailand\) app](#)^{**}. For more information about your health care benefits, contact your plan sponsor.

Be a flu fighter. Protect yourself, protect others.

COVID-19 resources: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/remote-working-social-distancing-support-resource.html>

Health Hub: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/members/login.do>

*For those eligible | **All vHealth apps can also be downloaded from the App Store.

Primary sources

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/different-flu-vaccines.htm>
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/flu-season-never-came-to-the-southern-hemisphere/>
<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm>

1 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6937a6.htm>
2 <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/vaccines-work/vaccineeffect.htm>
3 <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/season/faq-flu-season-2020-2021.htm>

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