

# 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.

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*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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