

Influenza, Colds, and COVID-19: How Do Their Symptoms Compare?

The flu, the common cold and COVID-19 are contagious respiratory illnesses caused by viruses. Because they share similar symptoms, it can be hard to tell the difference between them. In general, the common cold tends to cause milder symptoms than the flu, while COVID-19 can cause more serious symptoms than the flu. The chart below provides general information on how each of these respiratory illnesses may affect individuals, but each person may have very different experiences of the flu, the common cold, and COVID-19.

Common Symptoms*	Influenza	Colds	COVID-19
Fever	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usual (100° F–102° F; may be higher, especially in young children) • Lasts 3–4 days 	Rare	Common
Headache	Common	Uncommon	Common
General aches, pains	Usual; often severe	Slight	Common
Fatigue, weakness	Usual; can last up to 3 weeks	Sometimes	Common
Extreme exhaustion	Usual at the beginning of the illness	Never	Common
Stuffy, runny nose	Sometimes	Common	Common
Sneezing	Sometimes	Usual	Rarely
Sore throat	Sometimes	Common	Common
Cough	Common; can become severe	Common	Common, dry cough
Chest discomfort	Common	Mild to moderate	Common; can cause trouble breathing, or persistent pain or pressure in the chest, requiring immediate emergency care
Loss of taste or smell	Rarely	Rarely	Common

*All possible symptoms of influenza, colds or COVID-19 are not listed.
Source: *NIH News in Health*, January 2022.

If you have symptoms of influenza or COVID-19, you may need to get tested to find out which virus may be making you sick. It's possible to have both viruses at the same time, too. Contact a healthcare provider immediately if your symptoms are severe or cause concern.

USA-CRP-22-0023
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