

Influenza and COVID: How to tell them apart in 2024



Given the rising number of **respiratory infections** with the coming of winter, discover the main differences between **COVID-19** and **influenza**.

TecSalud infectious disease specialist **Dr. Gloria Aguirre** explained that other diseases are doing the rounds too, such as the **respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)** and **rhinovirus**, which have shown an **upward trend in the last few weeks**.

*“If you have already come down with a viral respiratory infection, make sure your COVID and influenza vaccines are up to date; **having been infected does not exempt you from reinfection from other strains**,” she warned.*

[CONNECTA](#) reveals the **main differences** between COVID and influenza.



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What's the difference between COVID and influenza?

Dr. Aguirre listed the **main differences** between **COVID** and **influenza**.

*"Influenza can be differentiated from the COVID-19 Omicron variant and other infections that cause the common cold, such as rhinovirus and RSV, by the **sudden manifestation of symptoms, high-grade fever, severe body aches, joint pain, and severe headaches.**"*

Sudden onset commonly occurs from one day to the next along with a **fever** of at least **38-39 degrees**.

*"(In the case of influenza) your **general state of wellbeing comes under siege**: body aches, joint pain, and muscle pain. Nasal congestion may be experienced. Coughing is not so frequent," she said.*

COVID-19 usually comes on **more gradually**.

"(With COVID-19) I have a sore throat one day and the next day I have congestion. And the day after that I start feeling weaker, and so on."

She said that **fever** is one way of **telling the two diseases apart**.

*"**Fever is usually more common in influenza**, and it is a **higher grade of fever**. Also, there is much more extreme fatigue. People complain a lot about aches and pains.*

In the case of COVID, the fever is not so high and its symptoms, in general, are:

- *A sore throat that causes dryness and itching*
- *Mild fever*
- *Runny nose*
- *Sneezing*
- *Mild to moderate fatigue*
- *Headache*

Higher number of cases during winter months

The specialist mentioned that, according to Ministry of Health epidemiology reports, **positive PCR testing for COVID-19 stands at 14%** nationwide.

However, **the numbers of cases are much lower** as compared to previous years, with significantly **less impact on hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19.**

The specialist mentioned that transmission of **influenza** and **respiratory syncytial virus** has become more common during recent weeks and is on a par with COVID-19.

“Even the number of hospitalizations from influenza pneumonia exceeds COVID for 2023-2024.”

Dr. Aguirre said that although there has been an increase in the number of cases of viral respiratory infections, **most have not required hospitalization.**

*“In the case of COVID-19, the **number of cases and hospitalizations have been much lower in comparison with previous years.**”*

“Compared to pre-pandemic and pandemic years, the number of influenza cases in the last two seasons has been higher.”

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Main precautions: face masks and vaccinations

The infectious disease specialist suggested **the use of masks and vaccinations as general prevention measures.**

“Mainly, wear masks in enclosed or poorly ventilated places to prevent transmission.”

She suggested completing the **full course of vaccinations** to reduce the risk of complications such as pneumonia.

The main vaccinations include those for COVID, influenza, RSV, and pneumococcus. **Consult your doctor to review and optimize your vaccination program.**

Also, keep as **safe a distance** from others as possible and **wash your hands** regularly with alcohol solutions and/or soap.

Finally, the specialist recommended **getting tested if you have symptoms** or if **you have been exposed** to someone with COVID-19 or the flu.

On another note, the infectious disease specialist warned that **quick tests for influenza** have a **sensitivity of 50 to 60%**.

“If a quick test gives a negative result, don’t rule out the possibility of having influenza,” she said.

“If you have already been sick with a viral respiratory infection, make sure your COVID and influenza vaccinations are up to date; having been infected does not exempt you from reinfection.”



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What should I do if I become infected?

- **Stay in quarantine for five to seven days until the symptoms disappear.**
- **Always wear a face mask.**
- Follow your doctor’s indications and **don’t self-medicate.**
- **Monitor your oxygenation** with an oximeter.

Dr. Aguirre pointed out that most cases involve the upper respiratory tract. This, in addition to the fact that a large part of the population has already been vaccinated or infected, means that the **prognosis of most cases is mild.**

Seek urgent medical attention if...

- **You have difficulty breathing.**
- **Your oxygenation level is below 90%.**

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