

# How to Differentiate COVID-19 from Flu and Allergies

With similar symptoms, it's challenging to differentiate among the flu, allergies and the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19. But doctors say there are several ways to tell them apart.

## AT A GLANCE

- The diseases each have a few key symptoms
- Flu season is still in high gear in many US states
- Allergy season could last longer this year due to a mild winter

People are often confused by some of the similar symptoms between COVID-19 and the flu, and with spring upon us, we now have allergies to add to the mix. Allergies can happen any time of the year, but are more common in the spring when pollen is prevalent in the air. And this year's allergy season could be a long one, thanks to a warmer winter in some regions.

"The 2020 allergy season may get off to an early start over the southern and eastern United States because of very mild winter conditions," Weather Underground weather and climate blogger Bob Henson said. "As of Monday, the spring leaf-out was running more than three weeks ahead of average in Washington and New York, according to the National Phenology Network. The leaf-out is the earliest in the 39-year record for parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia and the Carolinas."

Research has shown that that an early onset of spring increases the duration of exposure to tree pollen, Henson added.

We asked Dr. Kartik Cherabuddi, an infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist at the University of Florida, to explain the key symptoms and differences between allergies, the flu and COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus that is rapidly spreading worldwide.

## ALLERGIES

**Sneezing and itchiness** are the hallmark symptoms of seasonal allergies, technically known as allergic rhinitis or allergic sinusitis, and neither of those symptoms are prevalent with the flu or COVID-19, Cherabuddi said.

"I think those two kind of speak more to the allergy part of it," he said. "So if you're having itching, predominantly sneezing, some nasal obstruction ... those tend to be much more common with allergic rhinitis."

People might also be fatigued, but that's more due to loss of sleep because of the other symptoms versus the illness itself, he added. Post-nasal drip is also sometimes common.

Seasonal allergies affect up to three in every 10 people in the U.S., and most people who have allergies are already familiar with the symptoms. "Usually people have had this before," Cherabuddi said.

## FLU

While flu season typically starts to wane this time of year, nearly every state is still reporting high incidences of flu-related illness, according to the latest numbers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This flu season has been especially hard on children, a group that so far seems less affected by COVID-19.

Of the three illnesses, flu is the most common and the one a person is currently most likely to be diagnosed with, Cherabuddi said. **Fever, headaches and body aches** are the key symptoms of the flu. Some people might also experience a **slight sore throat and post-nasal drip**. "And just that feeling of not feeling well, **malaise, fatigue**," he said. "These tend to be present much more with the flu than anything else." Fever with the flu tends to be higher than with COVID-19, and the **onset of symptoms is quicker**.

## COVID-19

Unlike the flu, **symptoms of COVID-19 seem to take longer to show up, and the illness appears to linger for weeks** once someone is infected. "This one tends to be slower, not as much fever (or) very low fever," Cherabuddi said.

The most prominent symptoms of COVID-19 are a **dry cough and shortness of breath**, he said. Cherabuddi said studies from China show that **only about 40% of people infected had a fever** when they went to the hospital, but the rest developed one within a day or two. About two-thirds had a dry cough. Some people develop a severe case of pneumonia after days with the disease.

"In the people we know who had a pneumonia, it took about 9 or 10 days for them to even get there," Cherabuddi said. He pointed out that most cases weren't severe and the average duration from exposure to getting sick was about five days.

"What we know from the U.S. now is **most people have about a week of not feeling as well, some cough, some low-grade fevers, maybe some minor muscle aches**," he said.