Influenza (flu) Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is influenza?
A: Influenza (flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times lead to death.

Q: How many cases of influenza have been reported in El Paso County and Colorado?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>El Paso County Hospitalized Cases</th>
<th>Colorado Hospitalized Cases</th>
<th>Colorado Pediatric Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020-21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>3,546</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-19</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>3,832</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017-18</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>4,650</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016-17</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>3,340</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015-16</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>1,639</td>
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<td>2014-15</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>3,397</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>2013-14</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>1,759</td>
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<td>2012-13</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>1,530</td>
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<td>2011-12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>1,027</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q: What are possible explanations for the unusually low flu activity in the 2020-2021 flu season?
A: Flu and COVID-19 are both respiratory diseases. Both viruses are transmitted in similar ways, through droplets from people’s nose and mouth as they breathe, sing, cough, sneeze, etc. COVID-19 mitigation measures such as wearing face masks, staying home, hand washing, school closures, increased teleworking, smaller gatherings, reduced travel, increased ventilation of indoor spaces, and social distancing, impact spread of other respiratory viruses, including Influenza. This likely contributed to the decline in 2020-2021 flu incidence, hospitalizations and deaths. Influenza vaccination may have also contributed to reduced flu illness during the 2020–2021 season.

Q: When will flu activity begin and when will it peak?
A: Although the exact timing can vary from season to season, flu season typically occurs between the months of October and May in the United States. However, cases can occur year round.

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Q: Can I have flu and COVID-19 at the same time?
A: Yes. It is possible to have flu, as well as other respiratory illnesses, and COVID-19 at the same time. Health experts are still studying how common this can be. Some of the symptoms of flu and COVID-19 are similar, making it hard to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. Having both at the same time can make it more difficult for your body to fight off two viruses instead of just one. Diagnostic testing can help determine if you are sick with the flu and/or COVID-19. Public Health recommends getting vaccinated for both flu and COVID-19 to reduce the risk of infection and serious illness.

Q: Who gets influenza?
A: Anyone can get influenza. Most healthy individuals will have a mild illness. People who are at a higher risk for more serious symptoms are children younger than 5 years old; pregnant women; adults older than 65 years old; people who have medical conditions such as asthma, chronic lung disease, heart disease, kidney disease, blood disorders and diabetes; and people with weakened immune systems. Individuals who are vaccinated are less likely to have serious illness.

Q: What are the symptoms of influenza?
A: The symptoms of influenza can include fever, cough, body aches, headaches, tiredness and sometimes vomiting or diarrhea. These are similar to the respiratory symptoms associated with COVID-19 and some other respiratory illnesses. This is why it is important to get tested.

Q: How severe will influenza be this year?
A: The unpredictable nature of influenza makes it challenging to determine the severity of the upcoming season. It is expected that influenza and COVID-19 will be co-circulating in communities this season, however, there has been limited influenza virus circulation in the southern hemisphere, likely due to mask-wearing, social distancing and other strategies currently in use to prevent COVID-19 transmission. It should be anticipated that influenza guidance will change over time based on the transmission of influenza and COVID-19.

Q: How is influenza spread?
A: Influenza is spread through droplets when someone is coughing or sneezing, or it can be spread through physical contact with an infected person — such as shaking hands with an infected person and then touching one’s eyes, nose or mouth. It is possible to spread the flu 24 hours before symptoms occur. Flu can also be contagious five to seven days after someone is
sick. It is very important to practice good hand and cough hygiene and to stay home when not feeling well.

**Q: Will wearing a face covering or mask reduce the spread of influenza?**
**A:** Influenza and COVID-19 spread in similar ways. Medical experts think that the widespread, proper use of cloth face coverings may reduce the spread of influenza, just as proper use of face coverings reduces the spread of COVID-19.

**Q: How is influenza diagnosed?**
**A:** Influenza can be diagnosed by a physician through a positive test for the influenza virus.

**Q: What is the treatment for influenza?**
**A:** For most healthy individuals antiviral treatment is not necessary and people will recover on their own. For those who are at high risk for complications or who are experiencing severe symptoms, there are antiviral medications, effective if taken in the early stages of illness. These medications can help decrease the severity and length of the illness. Other respiratory illnesses may have treatment options, too. Your doctor can help you decide what is right for you. Contact your doctor early to get tested and discuss treatment options.

**Q: Is there a vaccine for influenza?**
**A:** There is a vaccine for influenza, and it is the best prevention tool. Public Health recommends everyone 6 months of age and older be vaccinated. There are multiple flu vaccines available; talk to your doctor or primary care physician if you have questions about which vaccine is best for you. Vaccinations decrease the number of people who get influenza. Even for those who do get the flu, vaccines decrease the severity of influenza illness, hospitalizations and death.

**Q: What can be done to prevent the spread of influenza?**
**A:** The most effective prevention strategy for influenza is vaccination. Additionally, other preventive measures for reducing the spread of COVID-19 are effective at combating influenza as well:

- If you are sick with the flu, stay home until 24 hours after the fever is gone without the use of fever-reducing medication.
- Wash hands frequently. Proper hand washing can prevent the spread of germs from an infected person.
- Cover your cough and sneezes with a tissue, or cough or sneeze into your inner elbow.

For more information visit [www.elpasocountyhealth.org](http://www.elpasocountyhealth.org).

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