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COVID-19: Influenza vs COVID-19
By Dr. Michele Dikkers, Chair of Clayton County Board of Health

Fall is here. School is in session. Flu is around the corner.

Influenza is a respiratory virus that typically dominates our winters. It keeps us home from work and keeps students home from school.

Symptoms can include fever, chills, body aches, headaches, runny nose, sore throat, cough and fatigue. Symptoms typically start 2-3 days after exposure and will last for a few days to two weeks. Secondary infections can occur as a complication to influenza, such as ear infections, sinus infections and pneumonia.

Do these symptoms sound familiar? They should. This year influenza has competition with COVID-19 for being the dominant respiratory infection this fall and winter.

So what's the difference?

Loss of smell and taste can be associated with COVID-19, typically not with influenza.

Influenza symptoms typically start 1-5 days after infection, COVID-19 symptoms can start anywhere from 2-14 days after infection.

Both can lead to severe infections such as pneumonia, however, COVID-19 can cause a more severe version, resistant to treatment.

COVID-19 can cause blood clots in lungs, heart, legs, and the brain, potentially leading to a stroke.

Most with influenza will recover in a few days to two weeks. COVID-19 symptoms can also recover in a few days to two weeks, but those with severe complications may be in the hospital for weeks to months. The cough itself may linger for weeks.

While there is much to learn about COVID-19, we are learning that this virus appears to trigger other reactions in the body, in some cases causing what appears to be an autoimmune response creating a situation where the body attacks itself.

COVID-19 attacks the lungs differently than influenza does, in some cases, much more aggressively.

COVID-19 may cause very few symptoms, creating “carriers” that can spread the virus, without knowing they are doing so.

Influenza treatments include antivirals that can be taken by mouth. COVID-19 treatment is continuing to be explored, while there are promising options, they are IV versions available for hospitalized patients only.

Death rate of influenza is 0.1%. Death rate of COVID-19 is 3-4%.
Last year 34,000 people died in the United States of influenza. In the past 9 months, 200,000 people have died in the United States of COVID-19. (It took the past five years for the same number of people to die of influenza.)

Another difference is the availability of a vaccine. There is a vaccine for influenza, there is not yet one for COVID-19. Many companies are working hard to come up with a safe vaccine that will hopefully be available next year.

Probably the most important thing about influenza and COVID-19, is that they are both spread by respiratory particles. Coughing, sneezing, and talking can easily cause spread. Wearing masks can help prevent the spread of both viruses.

So, while the diseases have similar symptoms, they are very much different in how they attack the body. Differences that we continue to struggle to understand and figure out, so as to come up with a treatment plan.

As fall and winter approach, get your influenza vaccine (now available at most clinics), wash your hands frequently and wear a mask. If you become ill, stay at home. Make an appointment with your health care provider for testing to determine if you have influenza, COVID-19 or another illness. Treatment options can proceed from there.

Remember, we are in this together.