SYMPTOM

COVID-19 symptoms

COVID-19 symptoms are changes such as cough, fever, tiredness, or altered taste and smell.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A cold or flu, sometimes with altered taste or smell

WHERE IT IS FELT
Nose, throat, chest, muscles, head, and digestive system

MOST COMMON CAUSES
COVID-19, influenza, other respiratory viruses

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New breathlessness, especially at rest or with minimal activity

USUALLY LASTS
Several days to weeks, depending on illness severity

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Symptoms worsen, persist, or you have higher-risk health conditions

Overview

COVID-19 symptoms are the changes you may notice after infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The virus mainly affects the airways and lungs, but it can also affect the digestive system, muscles, nervous system, and other parts of the body.

Symptoms range from mild to severe. Some people have no symptoms, while others feel as though they have a cold or flu. Your symptoms alone cannot confirm COVID-19 because influenza, common colds, and several other conditions can feel similar.

Symptoms often begin within several days of exposure. A test may help identify the cause, especially if you have been near someone with COVID-19 or plan to be around someone at higher risk of serious illness.

What it may feel or look like

Symptoms can begin gradually or come on quickly. You may have only one or two symptoms rather than the full group.

Commonly reported symptoms include:

A cough may be dry or produce mucus. You can have COVID-19 without a fever, and symptoms may change as the infection develops.

Children can have many of the same symptoms as adults. Younger children may instead seem unusually tired, irritable, less interested in food, or less active than normal.

- Sore throat, cough, or a blocked or runny nose
- Fever, chills, or feeling unusually hot
- Tiredness, headache, or muscle aches
- Shortness of breath
- A new change in taste or smell
- Nausea, vomiting, reduced appetite, or diarrhea

Common causes

When a test confirms COVID-19, the symptoms are caused by infection with SARS-CoV-2. Different variants and a person's immune response can influence which symptoms develop.

Other common respiratory viruses can cause a nearly identical group of symptoms. These include influenza, respiratory syncytial virus, and viruses that cause the common cold. More than one infection can occasionally occur at the same time.

Less common explanations depend on the main symptom. Allergies can cause congestion, sneezing, and an irritated throat. Asthma can cause cough, wheezing, or breathlessness. Food poisoning and other infections may cause vomiting or diarrhea. A bacterial throat or chest infection can also resemble a viral illness.

Breathlessness or chest discomfort can occasionally have a more urgent cause, such as pneumonia, a severe asthma flare, a heart problem, or a blood clot. These cannot be separated reliably by symptoms alone.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if you have:

Skin color changes may be harder to see on darker skin. Check the lips, tongue, nail beds, palms, or soles as well as the face.

Seek same-day medical advice for new or worsening breathlessness, difficulty keeping fluids

down, signs of dehydration, fainting, or symptoms that are becoming significantly worse. Signs of dehydration include very little urine, a dry mouth, and dizziness when standing.

Contact a healthcare professional promptly if symptoms begin and you have a higher risk of serious COVID-19. This may include older adults, people with weakened immune systems, pregnant people, and those with certain long-term health conditions. Prescription treatments work best when considered early.

Book a routine appointment if symptoms are not improving, keep returning, or continue to interfere with sleep, work, school, or normal activity. Ongoing cough, tiredness, breathlessness, concentration problems, or altered taste and smell also deserve follow-up.

- Severe difficulty breathing, gasping, or trouble speaking in sentences
- Persistent pain or pressure in your chest
- New confusion, collapse, or difficulty waking
- Pale, gray, or blue lips, skin, or nail beds
- An oxygen reading below the emergency threshold given in your care plan

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional may ask when your symptoms began, whether you had a known exposure, and whether you have health conditions that increase your risk. If needed, they may check your temperature, oxygen level, breathing, heart rate, throat, and chest.

A viral test can help distinguish COVID-19 from some other illnesses. Laboratory-based molecular tests, sometimes called PCR tests, are generally more sensitive than rapid antigen tests.

A negative rapid antigen test does not always rule out infection, particularly early in the illness. Follow the test instructions about repeating it. Testing for influenza or other viruses may also be useful when the result would affect treatment or infection precautions.

Chest imaging, blood tests, and other investigations are not routinely needed for mild symptoms. They may be used if there are signs of pneumonia, low oxygen, dehydration, or another possible cause.

Treatment and self-care

For mild symptoms, rest and drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow. Warm drinks,

honey for people older than 1 year, or throat lozenges may soothe a cough or sore throat.

Over-the-counter pain or fever medicines may help if they are safe for you. Follow the product label, and ask a pharmacist if you take other medicines or have liver, kidney, stomach, bleeding, or heart problems. Avoid combining products that contain the same active ingredient.

Prescription antiviral treatment may lower the risk of serious illness for some people. Eligibility depends on factors such as age, medical conditions, immune health, current medicines, and how recently symptoms started. Contact a healthcare professional promptly rather than waiting for symptoms to become severe.

Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline do not treat COVID-19 itself. They are only useful when a bacterial infection is also present.

While you are unwell, limit close contact with others, improve indoor ventilation, and follow current local public health advice. A well-fitting mask and good hand hygiene can provide added protection around other people.

What to expect

Many mild infections improve over several days to a few weeks. Fever and aches may settle before cough or tiredness. Taste and smell changes can take longer to recover.

Symptoms sometimes return after an initial improvement. Consider testing again and seek advice if the returning symptoms are worsening or if you are at higher risk.

Some people develop symptoms that continue or appear after the initial infection. This is often called long COVID. Symptoms can include fatigue, breathlessness, sleep problems, reduced concentration, or changes in smell and taste. Arrange routine follow-up if ongoing symptoms affect your daily life.

Common questions

Can symptoms alone tell me whether I have COVID-19?

No. COVID-19 can look like flu, a cold, or another respiratory infection. Testing provides more useful information than symptoms alone.

Can I have COVID-19 without a fever?

Yes. Some people have a cough, sore throat, tiredness, congestion, or other symptoms without developing a noticeable fever.

Does loss of smell or taste always mean COVID-19?

No. COVID-19 can cause it, but nasal swelling, allergies, other viruses, head injuries, and some medicines can also change smell or taste.

What should I do if a rapid test is negative?

Follow the test instructions, including any recommendation to repeat the test after the stated interval. Continue taking reasonable precautions while you are sick, particularly around people at higher risk.

Sources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Signs and Symptoms of COVID-19
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: COVID-19 Treatment and Preventive Medication
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Preventing Spread of Respiratory Viruses When You Are Sick
- US Food and Drug Administration: At-Home COVID-19 Antigen Tests-Take Steps to Reduce Your Risk of a False Negative Result
- World Health Organization: Coronavirus Disease-COVID-19 Fact Sheet
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence: COVID-19 Rapid Guideline-Managing COVID-19, NG191