

Don't Guess the Virus:

Why Early Testing and Treatment Matters

Flu, COVID-19, RSV and other respiratory illnesses often begin with similar symptoms. A cough, sneezing, a runny nose, or headache can be an early sign of infection, making it hard to tell which virus is responsible. Knowing the differences, getting tested, and starting treatment early can help prevent what may seem like a mild illness from becoming more serious.

SYMPTOMS ¹	FLU	COVID-19	RSV
Aches	Often	Sometimes	–
Difficulty Breathing	–	Often	Often
Fatigue	Often	Often	–
Fever	Often	Sometimes	Sometimes
Sore Throat	Sometimes	Often	–
Wheezing	–	–	Often
Loss of Taste or Smell	–	Sometimes	–

When should I test?²

Test as soon as symptoms start. Early testing helps you know what virus you're dealing with and whether treatment may help. This is especially important if you have a health condition or are at higher risk for severe illness.

At-home tests are available for **flu, COVID-19, and RSV**, or you can test with a clinician or pharmacist.

- ▶ **COVID-19:** Test when symptoms first appear. If your test is negative, test again.
- ▶ **Flu:** Test as soon as symptoms begin, ideally within the first 24-48 hours.
- ▶ **RSV:** Test within the first few days after symptoms start.

When should I treat?³

Don't wait. If you test positive, talk with a clinician or pharmacist right away. Antiviral medicines work best when started early.

- ▶ **COVID-19:** Ask about antivirals within the first 5-7 days of symptoms starting.
- ▶ **Flu:** Ask about antivirals within the first 1-2 days of symptoms starting.
- ▶ **RSV:** Ask about antivirals within the first 3 days of symptoms starting.

Bottom Line:

Test early. Treat early. Acting quickly can help reduce the risk of severe illness.

¹ National Foundation for Infectious Diseases

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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