

Should we worry about 'flurona'?



POSITIVE PARENTING

By Dr HUSNA MUSA

AMIDST the rise of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron viral variant over the last year, you may have also heard of reports of "flurona" cases in certain countries.

"Flurona" basically refers to a co-infection of Covid-19 and seasonal influenza (also known as flu).

The term first appeared in the media last January in a news article about a pregnant woman in Israel who was infected with both viruses at the same time.

It was claimed to be the first case of "flurona" in the country at the time.

In fact, the term is simply a catchy name coined by the media by combining the two words – "influenza" and "coronavirus" – to hype up the story.

"Flurona" is not an official or scientific term to describe the co-infection, and certainly not a type of new "supervirus" as some people may believe.

It is also not a new SARS-CoV-2 viral variant.

Co-infection vs variant

So, what makes "flurona", a type of co-infection, different from SARS-CoV-2 viral variants like Delta and Omicron?

A co-infection is when someone is infected by two or more pathogens (bacteria, viruses, fungi, etc.) concurrently or consecutively.

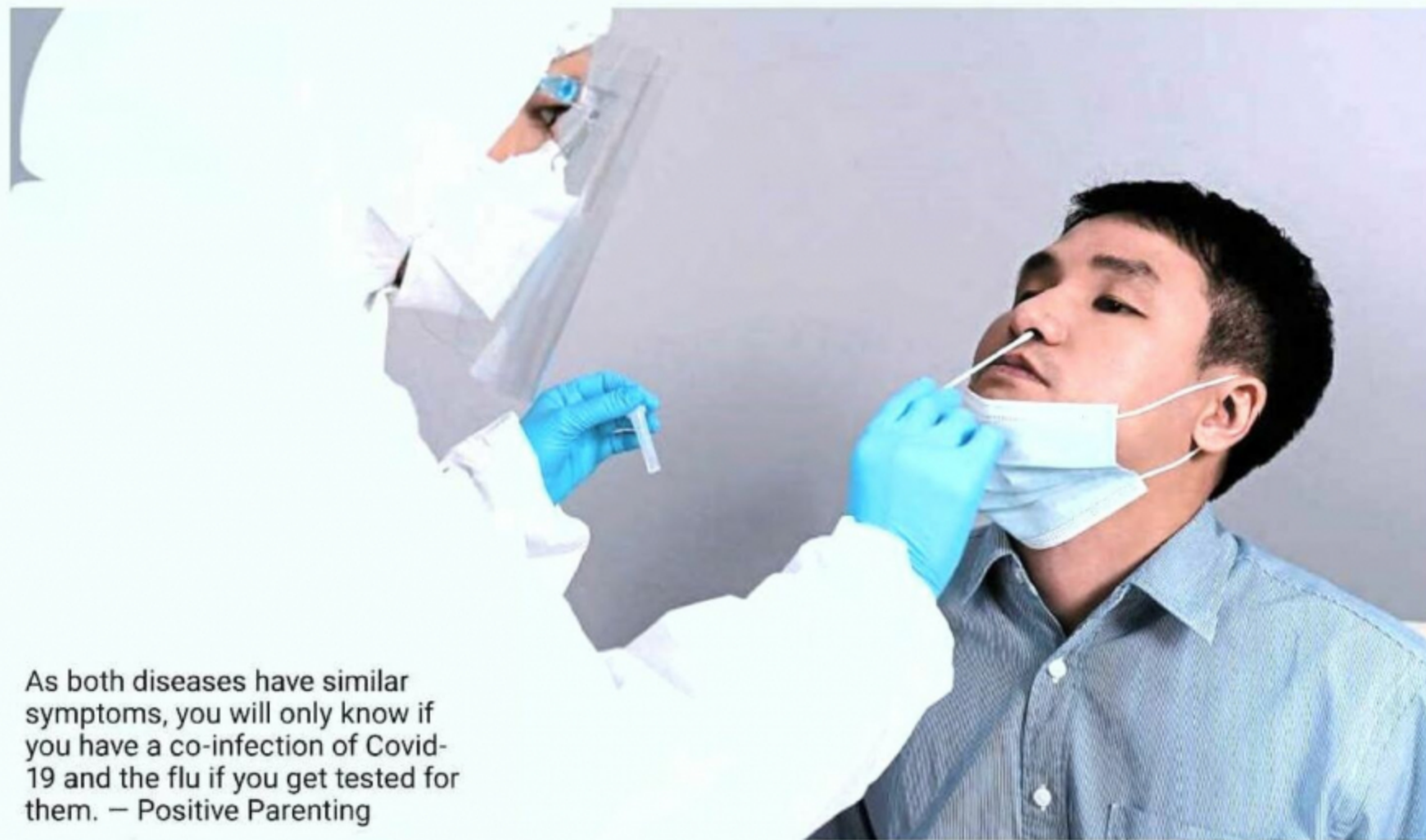
The body is more susceptible to another infection during or after an initial infection due to a suppressed immune system.

It is also known as multiple infection, concurrent infection, simultaneous infection and polymicrobial disease.

Aside from "flurona", other examples of co-infection include influenza and pneumococcus, and HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and tuberculosis.

Meanwhile, a viral variant has a number of mutations that differ-

With both the flu and SARS-CoV-2 viruses circulating, there is a risk of being hit with both infections at once.



As both diseases have similar symptoms, you will only know if you have a co-infection of Covid-19 and the flu if you get tested for them. – Positive Parenting

entiate it from other variants of the same species.

Viruses constantly change through mutation due to various factors, thus resulting in many new variants.

Some variants will persist, while others will disappear.

Other terms that may be used interchangeably with "variant" are "strain", "subspecies" and "lineage".

Examples include the SARS-CoV-2 Gamma, Delta and Omicron viral variants.

Should I be worried?

To answer this question, we need to know how prevalent it is and how dangerous the possible outcomes or complications are.

> Prevalence

Firstly, Covid-19 and influenza co-infection cases are not new and have been recorded even before the term "flurona" was coined.

In fact, it was seen in some of the earliest Covid-19 cases, e.g. in February 2020, a man and his

whole family in New York, United States, tested positive for both influenza and Covid-19.

Even the world's first known Covid-19 death outside of China, in the Philippines, had both Covid-19 and influenza.

A systematic review published in June 2021 estimated that 4.5% of Covid-19 patients in Asia also had influenza.

The study also found that 4.6% of Covid-19 patients over 50 years old had influenza co-infection.

However, it should be noted that the numbers may be underestimated because a co-infection would only be identified if a patient was specifically tested for both viruses, which is unlikely if the patient was not hospitalised.

These numbers are expected to rise with the increase in Covid-19 Omicron cases, coinciding with the onset of influenza season in the Northern hemisphere.

On top of that, other factors such as increased social mixing after prolonged lockdowns and low influenza vaccination rates

could also contribute to higher cases.

> Severity

Both viruses tend to infect the same type of cells in the upper and lower respiratory tracts, thus similar symptoms are usually observed.

The most common symptoms experienced by people with Covid-19 and influenza co-infection are fever, cough, shortness of breath, muscle ache and breathing difficulty.

Typically, any co-infection may worsen complications and increase the risk of death, especially among high-risk populations like the elderly, children below five, and people with underlying illnesses.

An animal study showed that pre-infection with influenza A virus may enhance SARS-CoV-2 infection in mice, leading to worse outcomes.

However, there is still inadequate data to determine whether real-life cases will have more severe complications.

What should I do?

Both Covid-19 and influenza are serious illnesses on their own.

And both have the same route of transmission, i.e. via respiratory droplets.

Thus, it is important to continue practising preventive measures such as wearing face masks, physical-distancing, frequent hand-washing and proper ventilation indoors.

Also remember to protect yourself and your loved ones by getting vaccinated against both Covid-19 and influenza.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not yet over and an influenza outbreak is always around the corner.

In fact, there was an upsurge of influenza cases in Malaysia at the end of 2021 and early last year, raising the concern of "flurona" locally.

Thus, the best course is to stay vigilant, no matter whether the threat comes from one of these viruses, or both as a co-infection.

Dr Husna Musa is a paediatrician and lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia. This article is courtesy of the Malaysian Paediatric Association's Positive Parenting programme in collaboration with expert partners. For further information, please email starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only, and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.