

Is It a Cold or the Flu?

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Overview

Your nose is stuffy, your throat is scratchy, and your head is pounding. Is it a cold or the seasonal flu? Symptoms can overlap, so unless your doctor runs a rapid flu test — a quick check done with a cotton swab from the back of your nose or throat — as soon as you start to get sick, it's hard to know for sure. Here are some basic guidelines on how to tell the difference between cold and flu symptoms, and what to do if you have either one of these infections.

What Is the Common Cold?

The common cold is called “common” for a reason. This seasonal respiratory infection is a leading cause of doctor’s office visits and missed work or school days each year. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 22 million school days are lost each year in the United States due to the common cold.

While a cold generally resolves quickly, symptoms can last for up to two weeks. However, unlike the flu, symptoms are generally mild and in most cases do not lead to any serious health complications.

According to the Mayo Clinic, more than 100 different viruses can cause the common cold. However, the **rhinovirus** is most often the one that makes people sneeze and sniffle, and it's highly contagious. Other frequent cold-causing pathogens include coronaviruses and respiratory syncytial viruses. Most cold-causing viruses thrive in environments with low humidity, which may be why colds are more common during the fall and winter months. However, you can catch a cold any time of year.

When someone who's sick sneezes or coughs, they send virus-filled droplets flying through the air. You can get sick if you touch a surface (such as a countertop or doorknob) that has recently been handled by a cold-infected person, and then touch your nose, mouth, or eyes.

Cold Symptoms

If you have a cold, you'll probably experience symptoms such as:

- runny or stuffy nose
- sore throat
- sneezing
- mild-to-moderate fever
- cough
- headache or body aches
- mild tiredness

How to Treat a Cold

Colds are contagious during the first two to three days, so stay home and rest up. Because this is a viral infection, antibiotics are not effective in treating a cold. However, over-the-counter medications (antihistamines, decongestants, acetaminophen, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines) can relieve congestion, aches, and other cold symptoms. Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.

Some people take natural cold remedies, such as zinc, vitamin C, or echinacea. According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, studies haven't confirmed whether these remedies can prevent or reduce the symptoms or length of a cold.

Colds usually clear up within a few days. See a doctor if your cold hasn't improved in about a week, or if you develop significant or persistent fevers. You could have allergies, or a bacterial infection (such as sinusitis or strep throat) that requires antibiotics. A nagging cough could also be a sign of asthma or bronchitis.

How to Prevent a Cold

There's an old saying that laments, "We can put a man on the moon, but we still can't cure the common cold." While it's true that doctors haven't yet identified a vaccine, there are ways to prevent this mild but annoying affliction.

Avoidance

Because colds spread so easily, the best prevention is avoidance. Stay away from anyone who is sick, and don't share utensils or any other personal items (e.g. toothbrush, towel). Sharing goes both ways — when you're sick with a cold, stay home.

Good Hygiene

Practice good hygiene. Wash your hands often with hot water and soap to get rid of any germs you might have picked up during the day, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Keep your hands away from your nose, eyes, and mouth when they're not freshly washed. Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and always wash your hands afterward.

What Is the Seasonal Flu?

Influenza — or the flu, as it's better known — is another upper respiratory illness. Unlike the common cold, the flu can develop into a more serious condition such as pneumonia. This is especially true for young children, older adults, pregnant women, and people with immunocompromising health conditions such as asthma, heart disease or diabetes.

Unlike the cold, which can hit at any time of year, the flu is generally seasonal. Flu season usually runs from fall to spring, peaking during the winter months. During flu season, you can catch the flu in the same way you'd pick up a cold: by coming into contact with droplets spread by an infected person.

The seasonal flu is caused by the influenza A, B, and C viruses. Active strains of influenza virus vary from year to year. That's why a new flu vaccine is formulated and released each year.

Flu Symptoms

Flu symptoms can be similar to those of a cold, although they tend to be more severe. Symptoms can include:

- dry, hacking cough
- moderate-to-high fever (although not everyone with the flu will run a fever)
- sore throat
- shaking chills
- severe muscle or body aches
- headache

- stuffy and runny nose
- profound fatigue (may last up to two weeks)

Some people may experience vomiting and diarrhea, but this is more common in children.

How to Treat the Flu

In most cases, fluids and rest are the best way to treat the flu. Over-the-counter decongestants and pain relievers such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen may control your symptoms and help you feel better. However, never give aspirin to children. It can increase the risk of a rare but serious condition called Reye's syndrome. Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration.

Your doctor may prescribe antiviral drugs — oseltamivir (Tamiflu), zanamivir (Relenza), or peramivir (Rapivab) — to treat the flu. These drugs can shorten the duration of the flu and prevent complications such as pneumonia, but you need to take them within the first 48 hours of getting sick in order to have a positive impact.

When to Call a Doctor

Call your doctor when you first have symptoms if you're at risk for complications from the flu. According to the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, those at risk for serious complications include:

- people over the age of 50
- pregnant women
- children under the age of 2
- those with weakened immune systems due to HIV/AIDS, steroid treatment, or chemotherapy
- people with chronic lung or heart conditions
- people with metabolic disorders such as diabetes, anemia, or kidney disease
- people living in long-term care facilities such as nursing homes

Contact your doctor right away if your symptoms do not improve, or if they become severe. See a doctor if you have signs of pneumonia, including:

- trouble breathing
- severe sore throat
- cough that produces green mucus
- high, persistent fever
- chest discomfort

Monitor children closely, and seek prompt medical treatment if they develop the following symptoms:

- labored breathing
- irritability
- lethargy
- refusing to eat or drink
- trouble awaking or interacting

How to Prevent the Flu

The best way to prevent the flu is by getting the flu shot. Most doctors recommend getting the flu vaccine in October, or at the very start of flu season. However, you can still get the vaccine in late fall or winter.

To avoid picking up the influenza virus, wash your hands often and thoroughly with warm soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Avoid touching your nose, eyes, and mouth, and try to stay away from anyone who has the flu or flu-like symptoms.

It's important to adopt healthy habits to keep cold and flu germs at bay. You should always make sure you get plenty of sleep, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, exercise, and manage your stress during cold and flu season and beyond.

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