

A Cold or the Flu

»» Which Is It?

If you're feeling sick, with symptoms such as a stuffy nose, sore throat, cough and general achiness, it can be tough to tell whether you have a cold or the flu. Both are respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses.

The flu is often worse than the common cold. Some symptoms, such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness and dry cough, are more common with the flu and may also be more intense. Colds are milder, and they are more likely to include a runny or stuffy nose. Colds usually do not result in serious health problems such as pneumonia or bacterial infections.

Distinguishing Between Cold and Flu

Here are some general ways to distinguish between cold and flu symptoms.

- Fever is rare with a cold and common with the flu.
 - Headache is rare with a cold and common with the flu.
 - Aches and pain are slight with a cold but often severe with the flu.
 - Extreme exhaustion is not associated with a cold but is a usual symptom at the start of the flu.
 - Fatigue and weakness occur occasionally with a cold but are typical with the flu. These symptoms may last 2 to 3 weeks.
 - Stuffy nose (nasal congestion) is common with a cold but not necessarily present with flu.
 - Sneezing is a usual symptom of a cold but occurs only sometimes with the flu.
 - Sore throat is common with a cold but occurs in only some cases of flu.
 - Chest discomfort and cough are mild to moderate when they occur with a cold. These symptoms are common with flu and can become severe.
- It is important to note that symptoms alone often are not enough to distinguish which illness you have. It can be difficult or even impossible to tell whether you have a cold or the flu. Your health care provider will sometimes give you a test to see if you have the flu.

The Right Medicine for Your Symptoms

There is no cure for the common cold, but some medicines and care strategies can help relieve your symptoms. Consider using a nasal decongestant for a stuffy nose, a cough suppressant to quiet a cough, an expectorant

to loosen mucus, an antihistamine to stop a runny nose and sneezing, or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug to reduce general discomforts.

If you are diagnosed with the flu, your health care provider may prescribe an antiviral drug specifically for the flu virus. Two of these drugs are recommended for use during the 2008–2009 flu season, and both are effective against influenza A and B viruses. They work only against the flu virus, not any other viruses that may cause symptoms similar to the flu.

Influenza antiviral drugs should be started within 2 days of becoming sick with the flu, and they should be taken for 5 days. If used correctly, the drugs can reduce your flu symptoms and shorten the time that you are sick by a day or two. In addition, they may make you less contagious to others.

No matter what, do not take antibiotics for a cold or the flu. They kill bacteria, not the viruses that cause colds and the flu. Plus, taking antibiotics when you don't need them increases the risk of a resistant infection later.

Prevention Tips

To avoid colds and the flu, follow these tips:

- Wash your hands often.
 - Avoid being around people who are sick.
 - Sneeze or cough into a tissue, then throw the tissue away.
 - Clean surfaces you touch with a disinfectant.
 - Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth, because viruses can enter your body at these points.
- To avoid getting the flu, you can also get vaccinated against the illness with a shot or the nasal spray vaccine. Certain people should definitely get vaccinated, including people 65 or older, nursing home patients and anyone older than 6 months who has health problems or long-term diseases. By the same token, some people should not get vaccinated. Talk to your health care provider to determine whether getting vaccinated is safe for you.
- Targeted antiviral drugs can also be used to prevent the flu in a person who is not sick, but who has been exposed to someone who has the flu. These drugs are about 70% to 90% effective when used to prevent the flu.
- Finally, if you were not able to get vaccinated or are at high risk of illness even after getting vaccinated, you may be given influenza antiviral drugs as a preventive measure. **NP**

The information in this handout was gathered from several sources: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov), the Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov) and the National Institutes of Health and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (www.niaid.nih.gov).

Additional Notes:
