

Know the difference between colds and the flu



The common cold and the flu are both respiratory illnesses and both are caused by viruses. If you have a bad cold or a mild flu, the symptoms may even feel similar. However, they are very different diseases. The differences are important because they can affect what you can do to prevent the disease, as well as what you should be aware of if you are infected. Here are a few differences:

- The flu virus spreads more rapidly in cold, damp air
- There is a vaccination for the flu, but not for the common cold
- The flu usually has more intense symptoms than a cold, with potentially serious complications
- While a cold is usually less worrisome than the flu, colds can lead to bacterial infections
- The symptoms of a cold can develop gradually, while flu symptoms usually hit fast and are severe

Comparing symptoms:

Symptom	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	High (100°-102° F) (37° – 39° C); can last 3-4 days
Headache	Rare	Intense
General Aches, Pains	Mild	Very common; often severe
Fatigue, Weakness	Mild	Intense; can last up to 2-3 weeks
Extreme Exhaustion	Never	Very common; starts early
Stuffy Nose	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Very common	Sometimes
Sore Throat	Common	Common
Cough	Mild to moderate	Common; can become severe

Source: American Lung Association: "Cold and Flu Guidelines: Influenza"

Symptoms of the flu and COVID-19 can also be similar. This program is not intended to include information on COVID-19. Other resources are available on the coronavirus pandemic. However, if in doubt please speak promptly to your healthcare provider.

The next time you experience a cold or a flu remember that they are caused by viruses, so taking antibiotics which target conditions caused by bacteria may not help.¹ Studies suggest the cold or flu has to run its course while you get plenty of physical and emotional rest.^{2,3} There are also many over-the-counter medications that can help relieve your symptoms.^{2,3} However, as with any illness, if symptoms persist or worsen it is best to see your healthcare provider to determine what's making you sick and what you can do to feel better.

In addition to the above-mentioned treatments, there are newer prescription medications called “antiviral drugs” that can be used in certain situations to treat the flu. Antiviral treatment works best when started soon after flu begins (especially within the first two days). If you are very sick with flu or are at high risk of serious flu complications based on your age or health, check with your doctor promptly.⁴

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Antibiotics aren't always the answer," March 2020
2. American Lung Association, "Facts about the common cold," March 2020
3. American Lung Association, "Influenza," March 2020
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "What you should know about flu antiviral drugs," April 2019

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