



Cold and Flu

The common cold and the flu are respiratory infections. Despite being quite different, they are often confused because they have similar symptoms. Colds are more commonplace and benign, while the flu can be much more serious.

The common cold and the flu share similar symptoms, including:

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
Fever	Absent or mild More common in children	Sudden onset Higher in children than in adults
Aches and pains	Rare Mild	Common Sometimes intense
Fatigue	Mild	Intense May last up to 2 to 3 weeks
Cough	Mild to moderate	Sudden onset Dry
Headache	Rare	Common Sometimes intense
Runny nose	Common	Possible
Sore throat	Common	Common
Nausea and vomiting	Rare Mild	Common (and often accompanied by diarrhea and abdominal pain) in children Rare in adults

Cold symptoms are usually milder and do not strike as quickly as the flu. A person who has a cold can usually go about their business, but a person with the flu is usually sick in bed.

Causes and triggers

The flu and a cold are caused by a virus that infects the nose, throat and lungs. Both infections are highly contagious and can be spread by:

- Direct contact (e.g., kissing or other forms of physical contact)
- Indirect contact (e.g., contaminated objects such as used tissues, doorknob)
- Air (e.g., when an infected person coughs or sneezes)

Colds and the flu typically occur between November and April. During these colder months, people tend to spend more time indoors, which allow germs to spread more easily.

There are many different cold viruses circulating at any one time. As for the flu, the virus responsible (influenza) changes from year to year. This means that you can catch several colds within the same year, and get the flu more than once in your lifetime. When children are young, they tend to have more colds because they have not yet built up enough defenses against the viruses responsible. Children catch fewer colds as they get older.

Treatment

A cold and the flu usually last between 5 and 7 days, but some symptoms may last for 2 weeks or even longer. Both infections usually go away on their own. The best medicine is rest and waiting for the cold or flu to run its course. Wait to be fever-free for at least 24 hours before going back to school or work.

Below are measures that will help make you more comfortable while your body fights off the infection:

- Drink plenty of fluids
- Take your temperature regularly
- Take acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol) or ibuprofen (e.g., Advil) to relieve fever as well as aches and pains
 - Check with your pharmacist to make sure these types of medications are safe for you or your child
- Perform a nasal rinse
- Gargle with warm water or suck on throat lozenges to ease a sore throat

Antibiotics are not effective in treating a cold or the flu. Some individuals, however, may benefit from antiviral drugs. These are prescribed by a doctor and work best when taken within the first 48 hours of the onset of flu symptoms. Your pharmacist may also provide recommendations on over-the-counter medications (e.g., decongestant, cough medicine). It is important to note that these products will not shorten the duration of the infection.

You can protect yourself and vulnerable loved ones by getting the flu shot every year. Ideally, the vaccine is administered at the start of the immunization period (in the fall). There is no vaccine against the common cold. However, some of the vaccines included in the immunization schedule protect against certain complications associated with respiratory tract infections (e.g., bacterial ear or lung infections).

Here are steps you can take to help prevent a cold or the flu:

- Wash your hands frequently
- Cough or sneeze in a tissue or in the crook of your elbow
- Avoid sharing cups, utensils and towels until they have been washed

When should I see a medical professional?

If your baby is younger than three months of age, go to the emergency room if the child:

- Has a fever (rectal temperature 38.5°C or higher)
- Is having difficulty breathing
- Is not eating or is vomiting

Call your doctor if you or your child is:

- Having difficulty breathing
- Drinking very little fluid and has not urinated at least every 6 hours when awake
- Having pain or pressure in the chest or stomach
- Suddenly feeling dizzy or confused
- Experiencing a fever accompanied by chills and shakes and a loss of appetite
- Experiencing severe vomiting
- Not feeling better after 5 days and still has a fever
- Feeling better after a few days then suddenly develops a fever
- Experiencing a fever and has a lung disease (e.g., emphysema or asthma)