

Do I Have a Cold or the Flu?

If you're sick with a stuffy nose, a sore throat, a cough and general achiness, it's difficult or even impossible to tell whether you have a cold or the flu. Both are respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses.

Symptoms of the flu often are worse than those of the common cold. Some symptoms, such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness and a dry cough, are more common with the flu and might be more intense than with a cold. Colds are milder, and they are more likely to include a runny or stuffy nose. Colds usually don't lead to serious problems such as pneumonia or bacterial infections.

Telling Cold and Flu Apart

Here are some ways to tell between cold and flu symptoms.

- Fever and headache are rare with a cold but common with the flu.
- Achiness is minor with a cold but often is severe with the flu.
- Extreme exhaustion is not a cold symptom but is usual at the start of the flu.
- Fatigue and weakness sometimes occur with a cold but are typical with the flu and can last two or three weeks.
- A stuffy nose, sneezing and a sore throat are common with a cold but not always present with the flu.
- Chest discomfort and cough are fairly mild with a cold. These symptoms are common with the flu and can become severe.

Symptoms alone often aren't enough to determine which illness you have, so your PA might give you a test to see which you have.

The Right Medicine

There's no cure for the common cold, but some medicines and care strategies can help relieve cold symptoms. For example, consider using a nasal decongestant for a stuffy nose, an expectorant to loosen mucus, an antihistamine to stop a runny nose and sneezing or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug to lower a fever and ease discomfort.

If you're diagnosed with the flu, your PA might prescribe a drug that targets the influenza virus, which causes the flu. Two of these drugs are recommended for use during the 2008-2009 flu season,

and both of them are effective against the two types of flu viruses, A and B.

Influenza antiviral drugs should be started within two days of your getting sick, and they should be taken for five days. If used right, the drugs can reduce flu symptoms and shorten the time you're sick by a day or two. And they might make you less contagious.

No matter what, don't take antibiotics for a cold or for the flu. These medications 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.

You can also get vaccinated against the flu with a shot or the nasal spray vaccine. Certain people definitely should get vaccinated, including people 65 or older, nursing home residents and anyone older than 6 months who has health problems or long-term diseases. On the other hand, some people should *not* get vaccinated. Talk to your PA to determine whether the flu vaccine is safe for you.

Targeted antiviral drugs also can be used to prevent the flu in people who aren't sick but who've been exposed to the flu. These drugs are as much as 90% effective when used this way.

If you weren't able to get vaccinated or if you're at high risk for flu even after getting vaccinated, you might be given influenza antiviral drugs for flu prevention. □

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

Influenza Is Widespread

On average, 5% to 20% of the U.S. population gets the flu each year; more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from complications, and about 36,000 people die from it.

Notes

Your physician assistant has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your PA.

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