

Flu vs. Cold

Updated 10/2018

Symptom Chart

Signs and Symptoms	Influenza ("Flu")	Cold
Symptom Onset	Abrupt	Gradual
Fever	Usual: lasts 3-4 days	Rare
Aches	Usual: often severe	Slight
Chills	Fairly common	Uncommon
Fatigue/Weakness	Usual	Sometimes
Sneezing	Sometimes	Common
Stuffy Nose	Sometimes	Common
Sore Throat	Sometimes	Common
Chest Discomfort/Cough	Common: can be severe	Mild to moderate
Headache	Common	Rare

What is the difference between a cold and flu?

Flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. Because these two types of illnesses have similar symptoms, it can be difficult to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. In general, flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms are more intense. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations. Flu can have very serious complications.

Reduce your risk of getting the flu and colds:

- The best way to prevent flu is by getting [vaccinated](#) each year. There is no vaccine to protect you from the cold.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. [Wash them for 20 seconds](#), and help young children do the same. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Viruses that cause colds can live on your hands, and regular hand washing can help protect you from getting sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands,
- Stay away from people who are sick.

How to Protect Others if you have a Cold or the Flu:

- Stay at home while you are sick
- Avoid close contact with others, such as hugging, kissing, or shaking hands
- Move away from people before coughing or sneezing
- Cough and sneeze into a tissue then throw it away, or cough and sneeze into your upper shirt sleeve, completely covering your mouth and nose
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose
- Disinfect frequently touched surfaces, and objects such as doorknobs, phones, keyboards, toys etc.

Treatment for Colds:

There is no cure for a cold. To feel better, you should get lots of rest and drink plenty of fluids.

Over-the-Counter medicines may help ease symptoms but will not make your cold go away any faster. Antibiotics will not help you recover from a cold.

Treatment for Flu:

In most cases:

The flu is a mild illness, which can be treated symptomatically, and people do not need medical care or antiviral drugs.

CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone. Your fever should be gone without the need to use a fever-reducing medicine

People in High Risk Groups with Serious Flu Symptoms:

If you have symptoms of flu and are in a high risk group, or are very sick or worried about your illness, contact your health care provider (HCP).

Certain people are at high risk of serious flu-related complications (including young children, people 65 and older, pregnant women and people with certain medical conditions). If you are in a high risk group and develop flu symptoms, it is best for you to contact your HCP early in your illness. Remind them about your high risk status. CDC recommends that people at high risk for complications should get antiviral treatment (*) as early as possible, because the benefit is greatest if treatment is started within 2 days after the onset of illness.

(*)HCP's may prescribe "antivirals" to treat the flu. These drugs can make you better faster and may also prevent serious complications.

Flu Symptoms that Require Prompt Treatment in the Emergency Room:

Children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In addition to the signs above, get medical help right away for any infant who has any of these signs:

- Being unable to eat
- Has no tears when crying
- Significantly fewer wet diapers than normal

Adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough

Helpful Website:

- www.cdc.gov