

Pass the Tissues!

How to Tell the Difference Between a Cold, the Flu and Allergies

It's that season again. When you first start to feel lousy, it's sometimes hard to know whether it's a cold, the flu or allergies acting up. Knowing the difference may help you pick the best treatment. All three ailments affect the respiratory system and can make it harder to breathe.

Colds and flu are caused by viruses. Both can give you a sore throat, congested head and cough, but the flu might also include a high fever, aches, pains, headache and extreme exhaustion. Allergy symptoms like sneezing and a stuffy nose can be confused with a cold, but allergies tend to make the eyes itchy and watery, which seldom happens with colds (or flu). Allergies are triggered by allergens (pollen, foods, pet dander, perfumes), not by viruses. When exposed to allergens, the delicate tissue in the nose and airways may swell and result in a runny or stuffed up nose.

Colds and allergies can progress to sinus infections: when the air cavities (or sinuses) on either side of the nose and the front center of the forehead become inflamed and don't drain. The mucous trapped in the sinuses causes pressure and can be a breeding ground for bacteria. Colds and sinus infections have similar symptoms, but colds usually peak after 3-5 days and then improve. Sinus infections tend to stick around longer and cause facial pain, tenderness or pressure; yellow or green mucous; and bad breath. Having allergies can increase the likelihood of developing sinus infections.

If a sore throat rears its ugly head, how do you decide if it is a cold symptom or strep throat? Strep is an infection in the throat and tonsils caused by bacteria. It is more common

among children than adults. The signs of strep include a sore throat that starts very quickly, pain when swallowing, swollen and red tonsils sometimes with white spots, fever and

Symptoms	Cold	Flu	Allergies
Fever	Rare	Usual, high (100-102 degrees F or higher), lasts 3-4 days	Never
Headache	Uncommon	Common	Uncommon
General Aches, Pains	Slight	Usual, often	Never
Fatigue, Weakness	Sometimes	Usual, can last up to 3 weeks	Sometimes
Extreme Exhaustion	Never	Usual, at the beginning	Never
Stuffy, Runny Nose	Common	Sometimes	Common
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes	Usual
Sore Throat	Common	Sometimes	Sometimes
Cough	Common	Common, can become severe	Sometimes
Chest Discomfort	Mild to moderate	Common	Rare, except for those with allergic asthma

Source: NIH News in Health

Tips for Avoiding Illness

- Handwashing is the BEST way to prevent the spread of illness since germs are spread easily by touching door handles, handrails, restaurant menus, shopping carts, phones, toys and other shared objects. Wash your hands with soap and warm water; scrub both sides, between your fingers, and under your nails. Always wash your hands before eating. Keep hand sanitizer (or wipes) on your desk or in your car for clean ups when washing with soap and water is not an option.
- Avoid crowded spaces where close contact with people is likely, especially if you're feeling rundown.
- Don't share utensils and dishes, particularly with sick people.
- The Centers for Disease Control recommends a yearly flu vaccine as the first and best way to protect against flu viruses. There are many flu viruses, but each year the vaccine is developed to target those that research suggests will be the most common. Even if you do get the flu, the vaccine is believed to reduce the severity and length of illness.
- Vitamin C, zinc, echinacea, elderberry syrup and other remedies are believed to boost the immune system. Evidence of these claims is mixed, but since some of these remedies are added to water, it can never hurt to drink plenty of fluids. Be aware that these remedies can be pricey.

The information contained in this newsletter is for general, educational purposes. It should not be considered a replacement for consultation with your healthcare provider. If you have concerns about your health, please contact your healthcare provider.

swollen lymph nodes in the front of the neck. If the sore throat is accompanied by a cough, runny nose, and hoarseness, the cause is likely a cold, and not a strep bacterial infection. A quick test by your provider can determine if strep is present.

While there is no cure for colds and flu, consider these remedies to ease the symptoms:

- REST! Drink fluids like water and herb tea; staying hydrated helps thin mucous and removes it from the body (and reduces the risk of sinus infections). Eat healthy foods to build strength. Some swear by eating chicken soup!
- Use saline nasal spray or drops and/or a cool mist vaporizer to moisten dry airways and loosen congestion. A neti pot can be used to clean out the nasal passages by pouring salt-water into the nostrils.
- Gargling with salt-water, eating ice chips and sucking on lozenges can help soothe a sore throat.
- Adding honey to hot tea can help calm a cough.

Multi-symptom over the counter (OTC) medications can provide temporary relief. These may contain ibuprofen or acetaminophen, a decongestant or antihistamine, and/or a cough suppressant. When selecting symptom relief, aim to match your symptoms with the medicine. If you are stuffed up, but don't have a cough or pain, it's better to take a decongestant and/or breathe in steam from a bowl of hot water rather than take medicine for symptoms you don't have. Note that decongestants should be avoided by those with high blood pressure since they relieve congestion by narrowing blood vessels.

If taking multi-symptom medicine, don't take any ingredients separately that are already in the multi-symptom formula; double dosing can cause dangerous side effects.

Antibiotics only treat bacterial infections so don't expect antibiotics to help a cold or flu virus. Antibiotics will be prescribed for strep throat and may be used to treat a sinus infection (if it is caused by bacteria).

Most people recover from a cold or flu without needing medical care, but for symptoms that are severe or last longer than 10 days, contact your primary care provider (PCP).

If you suspect the flu, you may benefit from taking anti-viral medication to reduce the severity of symptoms. To be effective, anti-viral medications must be started in the first day or two that flu symptoms appear. Young children, older adults, pregnant women, and those with weakened immune systems tend to be at higher risk for complications from the flu. If you are at higher risk, you may want to consult your PCP when flu symptoms first arise.

Allergy symptoms persist if the allergen continues to be present. For seasonal allergy sufferers, that can mean spending more time indoors with the windows closed. When outdoors, wearing a mask can filter out some allergens. If milk, cats, perfumes or other triggers are the cause, eliminating the allergen from your diet or environment can stop or ease the allergic reaction.

OTC medications containing antihistamines can help relieve allergy symptoms. Some allergy medicines contain diphenhydramine, which can cause drowsiness. Be sure to read labels carefully and/or consult with your PCP to select an allergy medicine without unwanted side effects. Those who have life-threatening allergic reactions often carry an epi-pen, a device to inject epinephrine, a medicine that re-opens closed airways in emergency situations.

We hope you stay healthy this season but if you develop symptoms, don't hesitate to consult with your KnovaSolutions clinician. Call us at **800/355-0885** (M-F, 8-8, MT).