

Is It a Cold? Or Is It the Flu? And What Do You Do?

by [Mary Calvagna, MS](#)

Consider these statistics:

- Thirty-five to 50 million Americans are infected with [influenza](#) (the flu) during flu season, which typically lasts from November to March. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Americans suffer 1 billion [colds](#) annually. (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases)

With so many people affected by these two infections, it may seem impossible to avoid catching one, or *both*. But, you can greatly reduce your chances. Arm yourself with the following information about the common cold and the flu—and don't be the next victim.

Is It A Cold or the Flu?

The symptoms for a cold and the flu are somewhat similar. This easy-to-read chart can help you determine which infection you may have.

Symptom	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rarely above 100.5-101, and then only for a day or so	Characteristic, high (102-104 F); last 3-4 days
Headache	Generally mild	Prominent
General aches, pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
Fatigue, weakness	Quite mild	Can last up to 2-3 weeks
Extreme exhaustion	Never	Early and prominent
Stuffy nose	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest discomfort, cough	Mild to moderate, hacking cough	Common; can become severe

Source: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Facts About the Common Cold

A cold is a minor infection of the throat and nose. Although colds are usually mild, they are the leading cause of doctor visits and job and school absenteeism. More than 200 different viruses are known to cause symptoms of a cold—although rhinoviruses and coronaviruses cause the majority of colds. Cold symptoms usually last about one to two weeks. Rarely, a cold can turn into a severe lower respiratory infection in young children.

Preventing a Cold

Colds are extremely contagious. A cold is transmitted by droplets of fluid that contain the cold virus. These droplets become airborne when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or speaks. You contaminate yourself by inhaling these droplets or touching a surface that they have landed on and then touching your eyes or nose. To help prevent getting a cold, take these simple precautions:

- Avoid close contact with people who have a cold.
- Wash your hands often.
- Do not touch your nose, eyes, or mouth. This will help you avoid infecting yourself with germs you may have picked up.

Avoid spreading your cold to others by:

- Covering your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue away.
- Wash your hands often.
- Limit close contact with others when you are sick.

Treating a Cold

Antibiotics will not cure a cold. In fact, you cannot cure a cold. But, certain things can help you reduce your discomfort. These include:

- Take certain over-the-counter medications:
 - Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) – to help relieve the aches and fever
 - Decongestant and antihistamine – to combat congestion
- Drink at least eight glasses of water and juice a day. This will help keep you hydrated.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine. These promote dehydration.
- Avoid smoke. It irritates an already sore throat and intensifies a cough.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Use a humidifier—an electric device that puts moisture into the air.

Facts about the Flu

The flu is an infection of the upper respiratory tract. It is caused by the influenza virus and is spread through the air. The flu is highly contagious. When an infected person sneezes, coughs, or speaks, tiny droplets full of flu particles are expelled. Because these droplets are small, they are suspended in the air long enough for another person to inhale them.

The flu and its symptoms are more severe than those of the common cold. The flu can lead to bronchitis or pneumonia. In addition, it can be life threatening for the elderly, people with lung disease, and anyone with a weakened immune system.

Preventing the Flu

A flu shot can lower your chance of getting the flu. The best time to get the shot is from early October to the middle of November, but shots can be given into February or March and still offer some benefit.

Treating the Flu

Most importantly, when you have the flu, you need rest. And until your symptoms are gone, it is a good idea to not go back to your full activity level. You also need plenty of liquids.

There are four antiviral medications available to treat the flu:

- Oseltamivir (Tamiflu®)
- Zanamivir (Relenza®)
- Amantadine (Symmetrel®)
- Rimantadine (Flumadine®)

Antivirals are only effective when taken within 48 hours after flu symptoms appear. These drugs can reduce the duration of your symptoms by a day or two and lessen their overall severity. You need to contact your doctor as soon as possible after flu symptoms appear to get the greatest benefit from these medications. Antibiotics will not work against the flu virus.

To relieve the aches and fever associated with the flu, you can try Acetaminophen, found in over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol®. For the congestion, stuffy nose, and cough, try a combination of decongestant and antihistamine.

When To Call the Health Service

You usually do not need to call a doctor if you have signs of the flu or a cold. However, you should contact your doctor if you experience any of the following difficulties:

- Your symptoms get worse
- Your symptoms last a long time
- After you feel better, you develop signs of a more serious problem. These include:
 - Sick-to-your-stomach feeling
 - Vomiting
 - High fever
 - Shaking chills
 - Chest pain
 - Coughing with a thick, yellow-green mucus

Because the four flu medications listed above can reduce the symptoms of influenza and prevent hospitalization and death among high risk persons (for example, those above age 65, young children, and persons with chronic illnesses requiring frequent medical attention), you and your doctor may choose to develop a “flu” plan if you fall into a high risk category. By following such a plan you may be able to start taking an anti-flu medication quickly in the (unlikely) event your yearly flu vaccine doesn’t protect you against the symptoms of influenza.

Resources

American Lung Association
www.lungusa.org

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
www.niaid.nih.gov

US Food and Drug Administration
www.fda.gov