

Understanding Cold and Flu Symptoms - Are You Con-FLU-sed?

This year's flu is turning out to be a nasty one. One of the primary strains we are seeing in folks this year is called H1N1 (also known as swine flu) and is the same strain that caused such a bad flu season in 2009. H1N1 is thought to be the same strain that was responsible for the global pandemic of 1918. Because the flu can be dangerous and the fact that most people cannot distinguish between a cold and the flu, I thought it might be helpful to give you some of the differentiating features.

I've made up a little cheat sheet, which I think will be helpful. (See below.)

Enough sickness to go around

According to the Centers for Disease Control, Americans suffer from a staggering one billion colds every year and, on average, each of us has a 20 percent chance of getting the flu. Adults average 2-4 colds a year; kids typically get more (with some getting as many as 12 colds every year).

Colds rarely cause serious complications; only about one percent of cases lead to complications (mostly sinus or ear infections). The flu, on the other hand, is responsible for around 35,000 deaths and 200,000 hospitalizations every year.

A virus is the cause of both colds and flu and though they share many symptoms, each illness has unique telltale signs.

Flu versus cold

In general, flu tends to come on quickly- meaning you go from feeling fine to bed-ridden in 24 hours or less. Most people will have a high fever, feel extremely achy and chilled, usually have a dry cough, and little appetite. The good news is that most people with the flu will have their symptoms resolve in a few days, while a cold can linger on.

People with underlying health issues are much more likely to have complications from the flu - including pneumonia. Colds, on the other hand, start with a runny or stuffy nose and a sore throat that you have probably felt coming on for days. When you have a cold, you rarely will have a fever, or it is very mild.

If you are coughing, sneezing, feeling a little run-down, with a scratchy throat, then you are more likely to be in the cold camp. If you are achy all over with a strong headache, you probably have the flu. Allergies can sometimes be mistaken for a cold or flu. Allergies typically present with itchy eyes, nasal congestion, or runny nose and sneezing - with no sore throat or fever.

Take a look at this cheat sheet to help you determine if it is a cold or flu:

	Cold or Flu?	
Questions	Flu	Cold
How fast was onset?	Sudden	Gradual
How tired do you feel?	Severe	Mild
Do you have a fever?	Yes, high fever	No (or mild) fever
Do you have cough or congestion?	Non-productive cough	Nasal congestion
How are your muscles?	Achy	Fine
Do you have the chills?	Usually	No

Prevention is the key

As with almost any illness, prevention is your best strategy. Talk to your physician about the flu vaccine and remember to eat especially well, take your vitamins, get some regular exercise, and get enough sleep. The number one prevention tool you have is to wash your hands frequently.

When to seek help

The big concern about colds and flu is not the illness itself, but what occurs afterwards.

Bacterial infections are more likely to happen in someone with the flu, but can occur as complications of a regular cold as well. If your cold progresses to facial or ear pain or you develop a persistent fever, it may be best to see your doctor.

Severe flu, like the Swine flu, can have intestinal symptoms, including persistent vomiting and diarrhea. If you are feeling increasingly weak, with a worsening cough, chest pain, or shortness of breath, you should probably be seen by your doctor.

Most colds and flu come and go without any severe problems and are easy to take care of on your own. Paying attention to your symptoms will help you determine if you need to seek further medical advice.

Stay well, my friends.

Jamie McManus, M.D., FAAFP

Chair of Medical Affairs, Health Science, & Education