

Do I have a Cold or the Flu?

When you wake up sneezing, coughing, and have that achy, feverish, can't move a muscle feeling, how do you know whether you have a common cold or the flu?

It's important to know the difference between flu and cold symptoms. A cold is a milder respiratory illness than the flu. While cold symptoms can make you feel bad for a few days, flu symptoms can make you feel quite ill for a few days to weeks. The flu can also result in serious health problems such as pneumonia and hospitalizations.

What are common cold symptoms?

Cold symptoms usually begin with a sore throat, which usually goes away after a day or two. Nasal symptoms, runny nose, and congestion follow, along with a cough by the fourth and fifth days. Fever is uncommon in adults, but a slight fever is possible. Children are more likely to have a fever with a cold.

With cold symptoms, the nose teems with watery nasal secretions for the first few days. Later, these become thicker and darker. Dark mucus is natural and **does not usually** mean you have developed a bacterial infection, such as a sinus infection.

How long do cold symptoms last?

Cold symptoms usually last for about a week. During the first three days that you have cold symptoms, you are contagious. This means you can pass the cold to others, so stay home and get some much-needed rest.

If cold symptoms do not seem to be improving after a week, you may have a bacterial infection, which means you may need antibiotics.

Sometimes you may mistake cold symptoms for allergic rhinitis (hay fever) or a sinus infection. If cold symptoms begin quickly and are improving after a week, then it is usually a cold, not allergy. **If your cold symptoms do not seem to be getting better after a week, check with your doctor to see if you have developed an allergy or sinusitis.**



What are common flu symptoms?

Flu symptoms are usually more severe than cold symptoms and come on quickly. Symptoms of flu include sore throat, fever, headache, muscle aches and soreness, congestion, and cough.



Most flu symptoms gradually improve over two to five days, but it's not uncommon to feel run down for a week or more. A common complication of the flu is pneumonia, particularly in the young, elderly, or people with lung or heart problems. If you notice shortness of breath, let your doctor know. Another common sign of pneumonia is fever that comes back after having been gone for a day or two.

Just like cold viruses, flu viruses enter your body through the mucous membranes of the nose, eyes, or mouth. Every time you touch your hand to one of these areas, you could be infecting yourself with a virus, which makes it very important to keep hands germ-free with frequent washing to prevent both flu and cold symptoms.

Is it the flu or a cold?

How do you know if you have flu or cold symptoms? **Take your temperature**, say many experts. Flu symptoms often mimic cold symptoms with nasal congestion, cough, aches, and malaise. But **a common cold rarely has symptoms of fever above 101 degrees.**

With flu symptoms, you will probably have a fever initially with the flu virus and you will feel miserable. Body and muscle aches are also more common with the flu. This table can help determine if you have cold or flu symptoms.

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
Fever	Sometimes, usually mild	Usual; higher (100-102 F; occasionally higher, especially in young children); lasts 3 to 4 days
Headache	Occasionally	Common
General Aches, Pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
Fatigue, Weakness	Sometimes	Usual; can last 2 to 3 weeks
Extreme Exhaustion	Never	Usual; at the beginning of the illness
Stuffy Nose	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes
Sore Throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest Discomfort, Cough	Mild to moderate; hacking cough	Common; can become severe
Treatment	Decongestants; pain reliever/fever reducer medicines	Decongestants, pain relievers, or fever reducers are available over the counter; over-the-counter cough and cold medicines should not be given to young children; prescription antiviral drugs for flu may be given in some cases; call a medical professional for more information about treatment.

When do I seek medical care with flu or cold symptoms?

If you already have flu or cold symptoms, it's important to seek medical care if you also have any of the following severe symptoms:

- **Persistent fever:** This can be a sign of another bacterial infection that should be treated.
- **Painful swallowing:** Although a sore throat from a cold or flu can cause mild discomfort, severe pain could mean strep throat, which requires treatment by a medical professional.
- **Persistent coughing:** When a cough doesn't go away after two or three weeks, it could be bronchitis, which may need an antibiotic. Postnasal drip or sinusitis can also result in a persistent cough. In addition, asthma is another cause of persistent coughing.
- **Persistent congestion and headaches:** When colds and allergies cause congestion and blockage of sinus passages, they can lead to a sinus infection (sinusitis). If you have pain around the eyes and face with thick nasal discharge after a week, you may have a bacterial infection and possibly need an antibiotic. Most sinus infections, however, do not need an antibiotic.



In some cases, you may need to get emergency medical attention right away. In adults, signs of a crisis include:

- Severe chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Confusion
- Severe headache
- Dizziness
- Persistent vomiting

In children, additional signs of an emergency are:

- Difficulty breathing or rapid breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Lethargy and failure to interact normally
- Extreme irritability or distress
- Symptoms that were improving and then suddenly worsen
- Fever with a rash



Please come to the
Otterbein University Student Health Center

if you need medical care for a cold or the flu.

Monday through Friday: 8:00am – 4:00pm
(614) 823-1345

No Appointment Necessary.