



## Is it a cold, the flu or an allergy?

**Colds, the flu and allergies have many similarities.**

In general, flu symptoms such as general aches, tiredness and fever are more severe than cold symptoms, and allergy symptoms such as itchy eyes and sneezing are more severe than cold symptoms. Colds and flu are caused by viruses. Allergies are caused by allergens: pollen, dust and pet dander to mention just a few.

Use the table to the right to distinguish between a cold, the flu and an allergy.

| SYMPTOMS             | COLD                     | FLU                           | RESPIRATORY ALLERGY |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Fever</b>         | Rare (low fever, if any) | Common – <b>(can be high)</b> | <b>Never</b>        |
| <b>Cough</b>         | Common (mild)            | Common                        | Sometimes           |
| <b>Runny nose</b>    | Common                   | Sometimes                     | Common              |
| <b>Sore throat</b>   | Common                   | Sometimes                     | Sometimes           |
| <b>Sneezing</b>      | <b>Usual</b>             | Sometimes                     | <b>Usual</b>        |
| <b>Itchy Eyes</b>    | <b>Rare or Never</b>     | <b>Rare or Never</b>          | Common              |
| <b>General Aches</b> | Slight                   | <b>Usual</b>                  | <b>Never</b>        |
| <b>Duration</b>      | 3-14 days                | 7-14 days                     | Weeks (seasonal)    |



## Allergies

Allergy symptoms appear when your immune system mounts a response to a foreign substance – an allergen - that it considers a dangerous invader. The body releases antibodies to fight off the antigens and at the same time releases histamines which produce irritating symptoms such as itchy eyes and a runny nose. Medications can be very helpful, as can immunotherapy and allergy shots. The most common respiratory allergens are: pollen from trees, grasses and weeds, mold, animal dander, dust and dust mites.

## Prevention

**Depending on what you are allergic to, the following tips may help:**

- Keep windows and doors closed during heavy pollen seasons.
- Wear a mask when mowing the lawn or cleaning the house.
- Change air filters monthly in heating and air conditioning units.
- Don't allow dander-producing pets in your home.
- Change from feather pillows, woolen blankets and clothes to cotton or synthetic materials.
- Observe general good health practices: exercise daily, stop smoking, avoid air pollutants, maintain a balanced diet

## Treatment

- Antihistamines – control sneezing, runny nose, stuffy nose, itchy eyes and congestion. They may cause drowsiness, dry mouth and nose
- Decongestants – control stuffy nose and congestion. They may act as a stimulant and cause insomnia and rapid heart beat
- Nasal steroids – reduce the reaction of nasal tissues (relieve swelling)
- Eye drops – relieve itchy, watery eyes
- Combination of antihistamines and decongestants
- The only “cure” may be injections that build up protective antibodies to specific allergens





## Cold & Flu

Colds are minor infections of the nose and throat caused by several different viruses. Adults get an average of two to four colds per year; younger children may suffer from six to eight per year. The flu is a respiratory infection caused by three types of virus: A, B and C. Types A and B are the most severe. These viruses constantly change as they circulate around the world. Type C causes either a very mild illness or no symptoms at all. Both cold and flu viruses are highly contagious. They are most often spread by droplets on surfaces and may also be inhaled.

### Prevention

- Wash your hands often.
- Avoid close contact with anyone with a cold.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes and nose.
- Eat a well balanced diet, get enough sleep and exercise regularly.
- Consider using a humidifier so that your sinuses do not dry out.
- Observe general good health practices: exercise daily, stop smoking, avoid air pollutants, and maintain a balanced diet.
- The flu vaccine is recommended for those in high risk groups – adults 50 years or older, children aged 6 months to 5 years, adults and children with chronic medical conditions, and health care workers.

## Treatment

Over-the-counter medications can provide temporary relief of symptoms. Antibiotics are not useful for treating cold and flu viruses. Antibiotics only treat bacterial infections and should only be taken after a doctor has diagnosed a secondary complication such as an ear infection, sinus infection or strep throat.

Herbs and minerals such as Echinacea, eucalyptus, garlic, honey, lemon, menthol, zinc and vitamin C have gotten a lot of publicity as cold remedies, but none of the claims made for them is solidly supported by scientific studies.

Antihistamines and decongestants relieve congestion, cough and nasal discharge. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines – acetaminophen, ibuprofen and aspirin (only for adults over 18 years of age) relieve fever, aches and pains, sinus pressure and a sore throat.

Antiviral medications may be prescribed for the flu. Treatment should start within 2 days of the appearance of flu symptoms to reduce the length and severity of the illness: Oseltamivir, Zanamivir, Amantadine, Rimantadine.

You should seek medical care IMMEDIATELY if you have two or more signs of meningitis. These signs might include a high fever, a stiff neck, nausea/vomiting, severe headache, purple bumpy skin rash or sensitivity to light. Seek medical care if you have two or more signs of a sinus infection. This might include a fever over 38.3 C, greenish-yellow/ blood-colored nasal discharge, headache/sinus pressure.