

Flu or Cold Symptoms?

When you wake up sneezing, coughing, and have that achy, feverish, can't move a muscle feeling, how do you know whether you have cold symptoms or the flu? And if it's the flu, could it be swine 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 -- whether it's typical seasonal flu or the swine flu virus -- 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, your 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.

Several hundred different viruses may cause your cold symptoms.

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 your 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?

Whether a person has typical seasonal flu or swine flu, the symptoms seem to be quite similar. Flu symptoms are usually more severe than cold symptoms and come on quickly. Symptoms of swine flu and seasonal flu include sore throat, fever, headache, muscle aches and soreness, congestion, and cough. Swine flu in particular is also associated with vomiting and diarrhea.

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, you should 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 your 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 your hands germ-free with frequent washing to prevent both flu and cold symptoms.

Is it flu or cold symptoms?

How do you know if you have flu or cold symptoms? Take your temperature, say many experts. Whether it's seasonal or swine influenza, the symptoms often mimic cold symptoms with nasal congestion, cough, aches, and malaise. But a common cold rarely has symptoms of fever above 101 degrees F. 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; high (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
Complications	Sinus congestion; middle ear infection	Sinusitis, bronchitis, ear infection, pneumonia; can be life-threatening
Prevention	Wash your hands often; avoid close contact with anyone with a cold	Wash your hands often; avoid close contact with anyone who has flu symptoms; for seasonal flu, get the annual flu shot; ask your doctor about antiviral medicine for either seasonal or swine flu.
Treatment	Antihistamines; decongestants; anti-inflammatory medicines	Antihistamines, decongestants, analgesics (ibuprofen, acetaminophen); antiviral drugs within the first 48 hours of seasonal or swine flu symptoms; call your doctor for more information about treatment.

Usually, the time of year will give you some sense of what you're dealing with. The standard flu season runs from fall to spring of the next year.

However, the picture has become a lot more complicated since the swine flu outbreak in April 2009. For now, experts don't know how that virus will spread over the coming months.

When do I call the doctor with flu or cold symptoms?

If you already have flu or cold symptoms, it's important to call your doctor 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 doctor.

- **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. [Asthma medications](#) such as steroids, anti-inflammatory medications, and [bronchodilators](#) are necessary to treat asthma.
- **Persistent congestion and headaches:** When colds and [allergies cause](#) congestion and blockage of sinus passages, they can lead to sinus infection. If you have pain around the eyes and face with thick nasal discharge after a week, you may have a bacterial infection and 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
- Severe headache
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Persistent vomiting

In children, 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

Can I prevent flu or cold symptoms?

The most important prevention measure for preventing colds, seasonal flu, and swine flu is frequent hand washing. Hand washing by rubbing the hands with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds helps to slough germs off the [skin](#).

In addition to hand washing to prevent flu or cold symptoms, you can also get a flu shot to prevent seasonal influenza. Seasonal flu activity in the United States generally peaks between late December and early March, so the CDC recommends getting a flu shot in October or November. Within two weeks of getting a flu shot, antibodies develop in your body and provide protection against flu symptoms. As of now, there is no vaccine for swine flu.

If you do get flu symptoms, call your doctor. If there's some chance that you may have been exposed to swine flu, your doctor may want to take samples and send them away for testing. Whether you have seasonal flu or swine flu, taking prescription antiviral drugs like Tamiflu and Relenza could help. So long as they're used within the first 48 hours of flu symptoms, the medications may help shorten recovery time. Antivirals may also help prevent seasonal or swine flu if you have been exposed to someone with flu symptoms.