



Cold or Flu?

Though the common cold and seasonal influenza share several symptoms, there are points of differentiation that will help you identify which you may have in order to seek proper treatment. It is important to tell the difference, as the flu can result in more serious health complications, while the cold likely will not.

Common Cold

Typically, symptoms of the common cold come on gradually, and may start with a sore throat or irritated sinuses. The most common symptoms of a cold are nasal congestion, sneezing and runny nose. Symptoms can also include a cough, mild headache and minor body aches. Young children may get a low-grade fever as well, but a fever in older children or adults typically indicates the flu.

People are generally contagious during the first three days they have a cold. Symptoms tend to go away within a week.

Seasonal Flu

Unlike the common cold, flu symptoms usually come on suddenly and vigorously, often starting with a high-grade fever, headache, body aches and fatigue. In addition, flu symptoms can include a dry cough, sore throat, and sometimes a runny or stuffy nose.

Symptoms are generally more severe than with a cold. Flu symptoms tend to gradually improve after two to five days, but can last for a week or more. You should stay home for at least 24 after your fever is gone to avoid passing your illness to others.

Prevention

There are strategies that can help you avoid getting sick from either of these conditions. These include frequent hand washing, sanitizing commonly touched surfaces, and avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth. If you are sick, cough and sneeze into your elbow to prevent spreading germs to others.

Also consider getting a seasonal flu vaccine each year, which is now recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for all people over 6 months of age.

Treatment

For the common cold, a doctor visit is usually unnecessary. Over-the-counter medications can be effective in treating symptoms. For the flu, a doctor may prescribe anti-viral drugs that will help decrease the severity and length of symptoms.

Potentially serious health complications can occur in people suffering from the flu. Call your doctor if you think your symptoms are worsening or if you have a condition such as asthma, diabetes or are pregnant.



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