

Ask a Doctor

Q:

“I’ve been sick for a few days. How do I know if I just have a bad cold or the flu?”

A:

Colds and influenza (flu) can be caused by hundreds of different viruses and strike most people multiple times during their life. Symptoms of a cold usually begin with a sore throat leading to a runny nose, congestion and a cough. A cold can cause a slight fever in adults but fever is more common in children. Cold symptoms typically last about a week. Influenza (flu) symptoms are similar but usually more severe than cold symptoms and onset can be very rapid. Flu symptoms include sore throat, high fever, headache, muscle aches, congestion and cough.

Cold symptoms last up to seven days or more; flu symptoms last two to five days, but it's not uncommon to feel run down for at least a week.

Secondary infections will sometimes set in for both colds and flu, such as ear infections and pneumonia. Common signs of pneumonia include a fever that comes back after having been gone for a day or two and shortness of breath. If you notice symptoms like these you should see your doctor. It's also important to call your doctor if you have any of these other severe symptoms:

- Difficulty breathing or chest pain: These could be signs of more serious problems, including pneumonia, asthma or even a heart problem.
- Persistent fever: This can be a sign of another bacterial infection that should be treated, especially when it lasts more than five to seven days.
- Severe headache: This could indicate meningitis, an inflammation of the lining of the brain.
- Vomiting or inability to keep fluids down: If you are vomiting frequently, you may be at serious risk of dehydration, which means there isn't enough fluid in your body to get blood to your organs.
- Painful swallowing: Although a sore throat from a cold or flu can cause mild discomfort, severe pain could mean strep throat, a potentially dangerous infection that 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.

To prevent the spread of cold or flu viruses the most important action is frequent hand-washing and avoiding close contact with others.

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