

Cold Versus Flu

What is the difference between a cold and flu?

Flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. Because these two types of illnesses have similar symptoms, it can be difficult to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. In general, flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms are more common and intense. Colds are usually milder than flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations. Flu can have very serious [associated complications](#).

How can you tell the difference between a cold and the flu?

Because colds and flu share many symptoms, it can be difficult (or even impossible) to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. Special tests that usually must be done within the first few days of illness can tell if a person has the flu.

What are the symptoms of the flu versus the symptoms of a cold?

The [symptoms of flu](#) can include fever or feeling feverish/chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches and fatigue (tiredness). Cold symptoms are usually milder than the symptoms of flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems.

Is it a cold or flu?



| Signs and Symptoms | Influenza | Cold |
|-------------------------|---------------|------------------|
| Symptom onset | Abrupt | Gradual |
| Fever | Usual | Rare |
| Aches | Usual | Slight |
| Chills | Fairly common | Uncommon |
| Fatigue, weakness | Usual | Sometimes |
| Sneezing | Sometimes | Common |
| Stuffy nose | Sometimes | Common |
| Sore throat | Sometimes | Common |
| Chest discomfort, cough | Common | Mild to moderate |
| Headache | Common | Rare |

Preventive Steps

Take time to get a [flu vaccine](#)

- CDC recommends a yearly flu vaccine as the first and most important step in protecting against influenza and its potentially serious complications.
- While there are many different flu viruses, flu vaccines protect against the 3 or 4 viruses that research suggests will be most common. Three-component vaccines contain an H3N2, an H1N1 and a B virus. Four component vaccines have an additional B virus component. (See [Vaccine Virus Selection](#) for this season's vaccine composition.)
- Flu vaccination can [reduce flu illnesses, doctors' visits, and missed work and school due to flu](#), as well as prevent flu-related hospitalizations.
- Flu vaccination also has been shown to significantly reduce a child's risk of dying from influenza.
- Also, there are data to suggest that even if someone gets sick after vaccination, their illness may be milder.

- Everyone 6 months of age and older should get a flu vaccine every year before flu activity begins in their community. CDC recommends getting vaccinated by the end of October. Learn more about [vaccine timing](#).
- For the 2018-2019 flu season, CDC and its Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommend annual influenza vaccination for everyone 6 months and older with any licensed, age-appropriate flu vaccine (inactivated, recombinant or nasal spray flu vaccines) with no preference expressed for any one vaccine over another. (See [Types of Flu Vaccines](#)).
- Vaccination of [high risk persons](#) is especially important to decrease their risk of severe flu illness.
- [People at high risk of serious flu complications](#) include young children, [pregnant women](#), people with chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes or heart and lung disease and [people 65 years and older](#).
- Vaccination also is important for [health care workers](#), and other people who live with or care for high risk people to keep from spreading flu to them.
- [Infants younger than 6 months](#) are at high risk of serious flu illness, but are too young to be vaccinated. Studies have shown that flu vaccination of the mother during pregnancy can protect the baby after birth from flu infection for several months. People who live with or care for infants should be vaccinated.

Take steps to stop the spread of germs.

- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.
- If you are sick with flu-like illness, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone for 24 hours without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.)
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. After using a tissue, throw it in the trash and wash your hands.
- [Wash your hands](#) often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs like flu.

Take [flu antiviral drugs](#) if your doctor prescribes them.

- If you get sick with flu, antiviral drugs can be used to treat your illness.
- Antiviral drugs are different from antibiotics. They are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) and are not available over-the-counter.
- Antiviral drugs can make illness milder and shorten the time you are sick. They may also prevent serious [flu complications](#).
- CDC recommends prompt antiviral treatment of people who are severely ill and people who are at high risk of serious flu complications who develop flu symptoms.
- For people with [high-risk factors](#), treatment with an antiviral drug can mean the difference between having a milder illness versus a very serious illness that could result in a hospital stay.
- Studies show that flu antiviral drugs work best for treatment when they are started within 48 hours of getting sick, but starting them later can still be helpful, especially if the sick person has a [high-risk health condition](#) or is very sick from flu. Follow your doctor's instructions for taking this drug.
- [Flu-like symptoms](#) include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people, especially children, may have vomiting and diarrhea. People may also be infected with flu and have respiratory symptoms without a fever.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/index.htm>