

Cold vs. Flu Information

What is the difference between a cold and the flu?

The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses.

Because these two types of illnesses have similar flu-like symptoms, it can be difficult to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone.

In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense.

Colds are usually milder than the 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

Influenza Symptoms

Influenza (also known as the flu) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by flu viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness. The flu is different from a cold. The flu usually comes on suddenly. People who have the flu often feel some or all of these symptoms:

- Fever* or feeling feverish/chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

** It's important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever.*

Flu Complications

Most people who get influenza will recover in a few days to less than 2 weeks, but some people will develop complications (such as pneumonia) as a result of the flu, some of which can be life-threatening and result in death.

Pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections are three examples of complications from flu. The flu can make chronic health problems worse. For example, people with asthma may experience asthma attacks while they have the flu, and people with chronic congestive heart failure may have worsening of this condition that is triggered by the flu.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you get sick with flu-like symptoms, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to get medical care. Most people with the flu have mild illness and do not need medical care or antiviral drugs.

There are **emergency warning signs**. Anyone who has them should get medical care right away.

What are the emergency warning signs?

In children

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In addition to the signs above, get medical help right away for any **infant** who has any of these signs:

- Being unable to eat
- Has trouble breathing
- Has no tears when crying
- Significantly fewer wet diapers than normal

In adults

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough

How long should I stay home if I'm sick?

CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other things you have to do and no one else can do for you. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine, such as Tylenol®.) You should stay home from work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings.

What should I do while I'm sick?

Stay away from others as much as possible to keep from making them sick. If you must leave home, for example to get medical care, wear a facemask if you have one, or cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. And wash your hands often to keep from spreading flu to others.