

COVID-19 is an emerging, rapidly evolving situation.

Get the latest public health information from CDC:

<https://www.coronavirus.gov>

Get the latest research information from NIH:

<https://covid19.nih.gov>

October 2014

Print this issue pdf

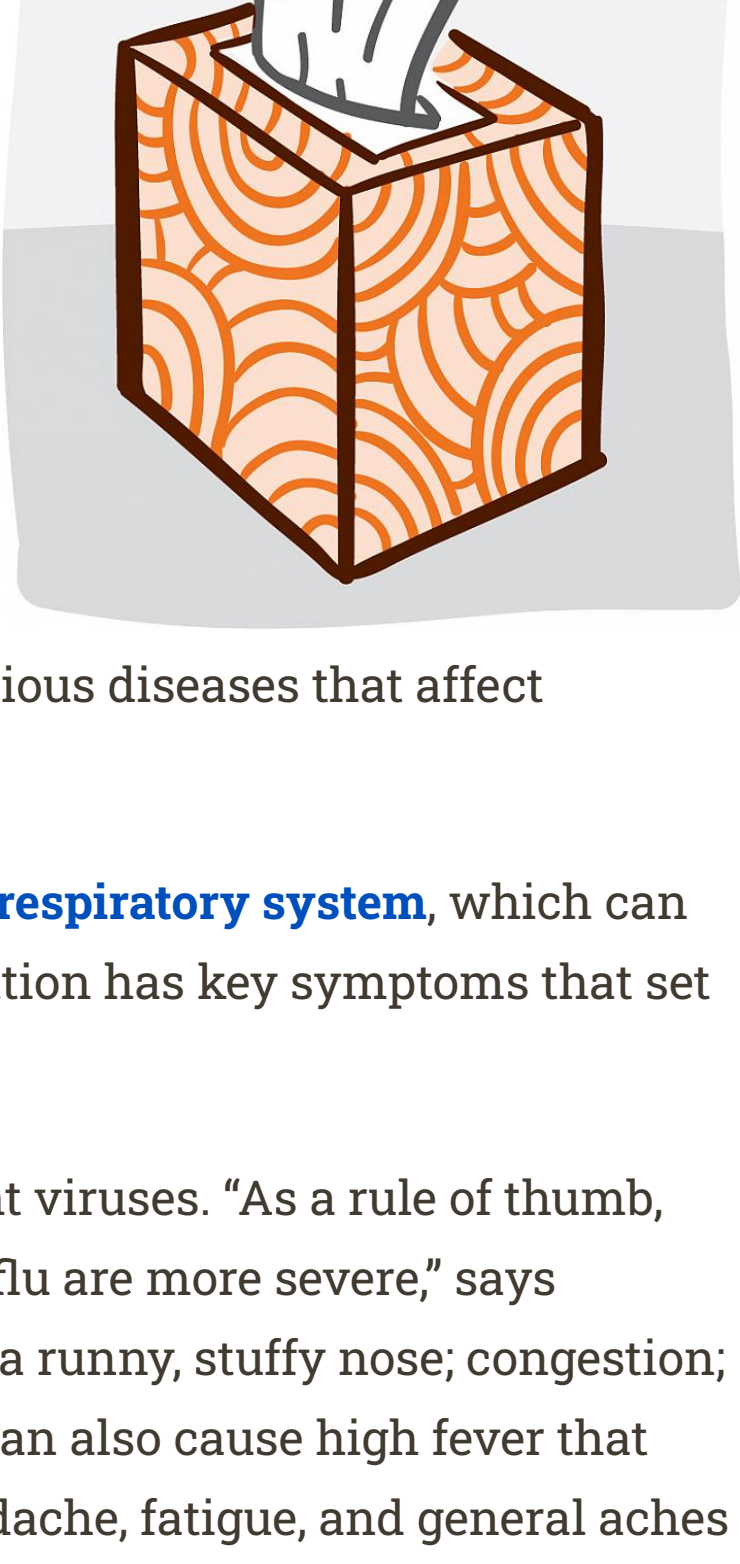
Cold, Flu, or Allergy?

Know the Difference for Best Treatment

En español | Send us your comments

You're feeling pretty lousy. You've got sniffles, sneezing, and a sore throat. Is it a cold, flu, or allergies? It can be hard to tell them apart because they share so many symptoms. But understanding the differences will help you choose the best treatment.

"If you know what you have, you won't take medications that you don't need, that aren't effective, or that might even make your symptoms worse," says NIH's Dr. Teresa Hauguel, an expert on infectious diseases that affect breathing.



Cold, flu, and allergy all affect your **respiratory system**, which can make it hard to breathe. Each condition has key symptoms that set them apart.

Colds and flu are caused by different viruses. "As a rule of thumb, the symptoms associated with the flu are more severe," says Hauguel. Both illnesses can lead to a runny, stuffy nose; congestion; cough; and sore throat. But the flu can also cause high fever that lasts for 3-4 days, along with a headache, fatigue, and general aches and pain. These symptoms are less common when you have a cold.

"Allergies are a little different, because they aren't caused by a virus," Hauguel explains. "Instead, it's your body's **immune system** reacting to a trigger, or allergen, which is something you're allergic to." If you have allergies and breathe in things like pollen or pet dander, the immune cells in your nose and airways may overreact to these harmless substances. Your delicate respiratory tissues may then swell, and your nose may become stuffed up or runny.

"Allergies can also cause itchy, watery eyes, which you don't normally have with a cold or flu," Hauguel adds.

Allergy symptoms usually last as long as you're exposed to the allergen, which may be about 6 weeks during pollen seasons in the spring, summer, or fall. Colds and flu rarely last beyond 2 weeks.

Most people with a cold or flu recover on their own without medical care. But check with a health care provider if symptoms last beyond 10 days or if symptoms aren't relieved by over-the-counter medicines. For more about when to see a doctor, go to **CDC's Flu Page**.

To treat colds or flu, get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids. If you have the flu, pain relievers such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen can reduce fever or aches. Allergies can be treated with antihistamines or decongestants. See the "Wise Choices" box for more details.

Be careful to avoid "drug overlap" when taking medicines that list 2 or more active ingredients on the label. For example, if you take 2 different drugs that contain acetaminophen—one for a stuffy nose and the other for headache—you may be getting too much acetaminophen.

"Read medicine labels carefully—the warnings, side effects, dosages. If you have questions, talk to your doctor or pharmacist, especially if you have children who are sick," Hauguel says. "You don't want to overmedicate, and you don't want to risk taking a medication that may interact with another."

Symptoms	Cold	Flu	Air Allergy
Fever	Rare	Usual, high (100-102 °F), sometimes higher, especially in young children); lasts 3-4 days	Never
Headache	Uncommon	Common	Uncommon
General Aches, Pains	Slight	Usual; often severe	Never
Fatigue, Weakness	Sometimes	Usual, can last up to 3 weeks	Sometimes
Extreme Exhaustion	Never	Usual, at the beginning of the illness	Never
Stuffy, Runny Nose	Common	Sometimes	Common
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes	Usual
Sore Throat	Common	Sometimes	Sometimes
Cough	Common	Common, can become severe	Sometimes
Chest Discomfort	Mild to moderate	Common	Rare; the allergic reaction
Treatment	Get plenty of rest. Stay hydrated. (Drink plenty of fluids.) Decongestants. Aspirin (ages 18 and up), acetaminophen, or ibuprofen for aches and pains	Get plenty of rest. Stay hydrated. Aspirin (ages 18 and up), acetaminophen, or ibuprofen for aches, pains, and fever Antiviral medicines (see your doctor)	Avoid (th you to) An Na De
Prevention	Wash your hands often. Avoid close contact with anyone who has a cold.	Get the flu vaccine each year. Wash your hands often. Avoid close contact with anyone who has the flu.	Avoid all as: ho mi pet coc
Complications	Sinus infection middle ear infection, asthma	Bronchitis, pneumonia; can be life-threatening	Sir mi inf ast



Wise Choices

Cold, Flu, or Allergy?

Treatment depends on which you have. A health professional can help you choose the best therapy.

Common Cold

- Symptoms last up to 2 weeks
- Stuffy, runny nose; sore throat; cough
- Treated with rest, fluids, over-the-counter (OTC) medicines to ease symptoms

Seasonal Flu

- Symptoms usually last 1-2 weeks
- High fever (100-102 °F, or higher in youngsters), headache, aches and pains, weakness, exhaustion, cough, chest discomfort
- Treated with rest, fluids, OTC medicines, prescription antiviral drugs

Airborne Allergy

- Lasts as long as allergens (such as pollen, pet dander) are present
- Stuffy, runny nose; itchy, watery eyes
- Treated with antihistamines, decongestants, nasal steroids



Links

- [Flu: NIH Health Information](#)
- [Catching a Cold When It's Warm](#)
- [Flu.gov](#) (CDC)

NIH Office of Communications and Public Liaison
Building 31, Room 5B52
Bethesda, MD 20892-2094
nihnewsinhealth@od.nih.gov
Tel: 301-451-8224

Editor: Harrison Wein, Ph.D.
Managing Editor: Tianna Hicklin, Ph.D.
Illustrator: Alan Defibaugh

Attention Editors: Reprint our articles and illustrations in your own publication. Our material is not copyrighted. Please acknowledge *NIH News in Health* as the source and send us a copy.

For more consumer health news and information, visit [health.nih.gov](#).

For wellness toolkits, visit www.nih.gov/wellnesstoolkits.

☒ Subscribe

Find us on Facebook

RSS

Home

Past Issues

About Us

Privacy

Accessibility

Freedom of Information Act

No Fear Act

Office of Inspector General

USA.gov – Government Made Easy

NIH...Turning Discovery Into Health®

National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, Maryland 20892

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services