Do I have a cold or the flu? [1]

Hi Alice,

I've been wicked sick all week with a really bad runny nose, face pain, cough and now my right ear is hurting. I can't think!! And I am trying to study for exams!!!

My mom told me I have the flu and should go to a doctor to get medicine to treat it. But I think it's just a wicked bad cold. Can you tell me the difference?

Thanks,
Faucet Nose

Answer

Dear Faucet Nose,

Having a cold or the flu can certainly be the pits. But how do you know which is which? People often wonder if they've got the "common cold," something more serious like influenza ("the flu"), or even pneumonia. Here are a few characteristic clues that may help you tell the difference between a bad cold and the flu:

- **Onset:** A cold usually comes on gradually, over days or even a week. The flu hits you like a truck; you wake up one morning and you feel awful while yesterday, you were fine.
- **Fever:** In adolescents and adults, a cold rarely causes a fever. When it comes to the flu, it almost always causes high fever (100 to 102°F) and can be higher in young children; the fever typically lasts for three to four days.
- **Cough:** Both a cold and the flu can cause a cough? for colds it's usually mild to moderate but for flu, it can become severe and lead to chest discomfort.
- **Other symptoms:** A cold usually affects just the upper respiratory system: runny or stuffy nose, sore throat, sinuses, and ears. The flu gets your whole body involved: you may have cold-like symptoms but you may also feel really achy and weak. These symptoms can last for two to three weeks.

Even though this information may be a place to start, it can be difficult to tell the difference based on only symptoms. If you think you may have the flu and your symptoms are less than 48 hours old, you might want to contact your health care provider. S/he may be able to perform a quick, easy test to diagnose the flu. If you?re diagnosed with the flu, you?ll be able to get started on treatment (if necessary) as soon as possible. If you find you?re having trouble breathing, or feel short of breath with normal activity (whether with a cold or the flu),
it’s best to promptly contact your health care provider.

The flu may be treated with over-the-counter (OTC) medications and, in some cases, with prescription antiviral medication. For a cold, you can treat the symptoms with OTC medications like antihistamines, decongestants, and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID). It’s good to note that antibiotics don’t help with either cold or flu specifically— they may be used if you acquire a bacterial infection at the same time or that is caused by the flu or cold. Because there are many different strains of the flu, it’s often helpful to know if there is a specific strain going around. To find out more, two resources to check out are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) flu page [2] and flu.gov [3].

Of course, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Here are a few tips to help reduce your cold and flu risk:

- Wash your hands frequently.
- Keep your hands away from your face (especially your nose and mouth).
- Get a seasonal flu shot.
- Cover your mouth/nose when sneezing and coughing (tissue or sleeve, not your hands).
- Using antibacterial wipes on public equipment like computer keyboards and phones.
- Open restroom doors with a paper towel to keep your hands clean.
- Stay home if you are not feeling well.

Feel better soon!

Alice!

Category:
General Health [4]
Colds & Flu [5]

Related questions

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Resources

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[1] http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/do-i-have-cold-or-flu