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Is it the common cold or the flu?



By: Dr. Elizabeth Polsinelli

An age old question primary care doctors regularly face:

Do you think it's the cold or the flu?

There is a difference between the cold virus and the influenza virus commonly known as the flu. While both have origins as respiratory illnesses and have similar symptoms, flu symptoms pack a more powerful punch. The flu can lead to health ailments including pneumonia and bacterial infections and may even lead to hospitalization. Some of the flu's symptoms include: fever or chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, fatigue and in some cases, vomiting and diarrhea.

Flu recommendations

People at the highest risk for getting sick with the flu are children ages 2 and younger, adults' age 65 and older, and any individual with a chronic medical condition. Organizations like the Center for Disease Control (CDC), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and American College of Physicians (ACP) all recommend the flu shot for children and adults. The AAP recommends all children ages 6 months and older receive a flu shot.

The CDC recommends if an infant is unable to eat, has trouble breathing, has no tears when crying and has significantly fewer wet diapers than normal, to get medical help right away.

Common Cold Symptoms present less severely than the flu

Signs and symptoms of the flu come on abruptly while symptom onset for the cold is gradual. With the flu, a fever is usual, and lasts from 3-4 days while fever with a cold is rare. Body aches with the flu are common while those who experience a cold will only have a slight chance of aches. Chills can be common with the flu and uncommon with the cold.

Weakness is a usual symptom with the flu but only sometimes with a cold. Sneezing, stuffy nose and sore throat are common with the cold and only sometimes present as a symptom with the flu.

flu. Chest discomfort and cough are far more common with the flu but can be mild to moderate with a hacking cough. Headache is common with the flu but rare with the cold.

Emergency Signs of flu sickness

According to the CDC, for children, fast breathing or trouble breathing, bluish skin color, not drinking enough fluids, not waking up or interacting, being so irritable that the child does not want to be held are all emergency signs of flu onset. So are flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough and fever with a rash. Emergency signs of flu illness in adults include difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen, sudden dizziness, confusion, severe or persistent vomiting and flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with a fever and worse cough.

Being aware of the differences between a cold and flu can help determine treatment options. Consult a primary care physician to determine options to prevent and treat cold or flu.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/coldflu.htm>

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