



How to Tell the Difference Between a Cold and the Flu

The cold and flu are both respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different types of viruses. Flu symptoms usually come on quickly (within 3-6 hours) and consist of a fever, body aches, dry cough, and extreme tiredness. Cold symptoms are less severe and people experience a stuffy nose, productive cough, slight tiredness, and limited body aches.

Use the chart below as a quick reference to determine if what you have is just a cold or if it's the flu.

SYMPTOMS	COLD	FLU
Fever	Rare	Usually Present
Aches	Slight	Usual, often severe
Chills	Uncommon	Fairly Common
Tiredness	Mild	Moderate to severe
Sudden Symptoms	Symptoms appear gradually	Symptoms can appear within 3-6 hours
Coughing	Hacking, productive cough	Dry, unproductive cough
Sneezing	Common	Uncommon
Stuffy nose	Common	Uncommon
Sore throat	Common	Uncommon
Chest Discomfort	Mild to moderate	Often severe
Headache	Uncommon	Common

Cold Remedies: What Works

If you catch a cold, you can expect to be sick for about a week. But that doesn't mean you have to be miserable. These remedies may help:

- **Water and other fluids.** You can't flush a cold out of your system, but drinking plenty of liquids can help. Water, juice, clear broth or warm lemon water with honey helps loosen congestion and prevents dehydration. Avoid alcohol, coffee and caffeinated sodas, which make dehydration worse.
- **Salt water.** A salt water gargle — 1/2 teaspoon salt in an 8-ounce glass of warm water — can temporarily relieve a sore or scratchy throat.
- **Saline nasal sprays.** Over-the-counter saline nasal sprays combat stuffiness and congestion. Unlike nasal decongestants, saline sprays don't lead to a rebound effect — a worsening of symptoms when the medication is discontinued — and most are safe and nonirritating, even for children.

- **Over-the-counter cold medications.** Nonprescription decongestants and pain relievers offer some symptom relief, but they won't prevent a cold or shorten its duration, and most have some side effects. If used for more than a few days, they can actually make symptoms worse. Keep in mind that acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) can cause serious liver damage or liver failure if taken in high doses. It's common for people to take Tylenol in addition to flu medications that also contain acetaminophen, which can lead to drug overdoses. Read the labels of any cold medication carefully to make sure you're not overdosing.
- **Humidity.** Cold viruses thrive in dry conditions — another reason why colds are more common in winter. Parched air also dries the mucous membranes, causing a stuffy nose and scratchy throat. A humidifier can add moisture to your home, but it can also add mold, fungi and bacteria if not cleaned properly. Change the water in your humidifier daily, and clean the unit at least once every three days.

Cold Remedies: What Doesn't Work

The list of ineffective cold remedies is long. A few of the more common ones that don't work include:

- **Antibiotics.** These destroy bacteria, but they're no help against cold viruses. Avoid asking your doctor for antibiotics for a cold or using old antibiotics you have on hand. You won't get well any faster, and inappropriate use of antibiotics contributes to the serious and growing problem of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.
- **Antihistamines.** Although antihistamines can help the runny nose, watery eyes and sneezing that occur with allergies, they have the opposite effect on cold symptoms, further drying nasal membranes and impeding the flow of mucus.
- **Not eating.** Despite the old adage "Starve a cold, feed a fever," there's no evidence that avoiding food shortens a cold's duration or reduces symptoms.

Try to Avoid Getting a Cold or the Flu

Follow these tips to reduce the risk of contracting the flu, a cold or other communicable diseases:

TIP #1

Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too.

TIP #2

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or the bend in your elbow when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent spread of disease to those around you.

TIP #3

Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs. Wash your hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds or clean them with an alcohol-based hand cleaner.

TIP #4

Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

TIP #5

Get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids and eat nutritious food.

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get the flu vaccine each year. All PSU students, faculty, and staff are encouraged to receive an influenza vaccination. Flu shots will be available Mid-September at Student Health Services – appointments may be made online by visiting our website www.pittstate.edu/health, or call (620)-235-4452.