

Ask a Doctor

Cold and Flu Season

By Virginia Witt, MD
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Q: What is the difference between a cold and the flu?

A: Both colds and flu are caused by viruses, but the flu tends to be more severe and may have more serious complications, such as pneumonia. Flu symptoms usually start with body aches, shaking chills, headache, fatigue, a high fever (often over 102 degrees) and a sore throat, which may be accompanied by a deep, chesty cough. The flu usually lasts from 7 to 10 days without treatment and can be debilitating. A cold usually has more prominent upper respiratory symptoms, like a runny nose, congestion, that may or may not come with a sore throat and a cough. These symptoms are usually milder than the flu. Colds rarely come with a fever that is over 100.5 F. Complications of a cold are not common and are usually not serious, and may include ear infections, sinusitis, or bronchitis.

Q: How are colds and the flu spread?

A: Both viruses are spread through direct contact with secretions, and nasal secretions have the highest viral concentrations. Unwashed hands are the most common way to spread your germs to someone else, or to pick up someone else's germs, because the viruses can linger for hours on surfaces such as door handles, light switches, and tabletops. Viruses can also be spread in saliva droplets when coughing or sneezing, which is why it is important to cover a cough or sneeze with your sleeve. You are usually the most contagious during the first few days of your illness.

Q: Who should get a flu shot this season?

A: As a family physician, I recommend the flu vaccine for anyone over the age of 6 months. While babies can't get flu shots, they can catch these illnesses, and they are at higher risk for serious complications. So if you spend time with a baby, you should absolutely get a flu shot. Anyone who has, or lives with someone who has, a chronic illness such as asthma, COPD, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer should get a flu shot. People who work with the public in any way, but especially those who work with children, are also at risk for exposure, and should protect themselves with a flu shot. Children are the largest reservoir for viruses, and let's face it – they're a snotty bunch and would be happy to share their germs. Protect yourself with a flu shot!

Q: What else can I do to reduce the chance of getting a cold and/or the flu this season?

A: Besides a vaccine, the first and best way to keep from getting the flu is good hand hygiene – wash your hands with soap and warm water frequently, especially if you shake hands with people, work with the public, or spend time with children. Treat yourself well – eat well, drink plenty of fluids, and get at least 8 hours of sleep if you can. Keeping your body healthy will keep your immune system in tip-top form, and will help fight off colds and the flu if you are exposed.

Q: If I get a cold or the flu, what over the counter treatments are available?

A: If you think you have the flu, don't rely on over-the-counter medications. Visit your doctor within the first 24 to 48 hours of your illness to get medicine that will shorten the length of illness and lessen the symptoms. Remember, there can be serious complications from the flu, especially in the very young, very old, or those who are ill, so prompt treatment is important

If you have a cold get an antihistamine if you have a runny nose, acetaminophen or ibuprofen if you have a sore throat and body aches, a decongestant if you have stuffy head cold symptoms, dextromethorphan if you have a cough, and guaifenesin to help loosen any type of congestion. Salt water gargles have proven effective for reducing bacteria in the throat, and can be soothing. Drink lots of fluids, rest, and get some extra Vitamin C and Zinc. Remember, no aspirin for anyone under the age of 18 due to risk of a rare but dangerous complication called Reye's Syndrome.

Q: When should I consult a doctor about my illness?

A: Any time you think you have the flu, (high fever, body aches, shaking chills, deep chesty cough) see your doctor at once. If you have a cold that lasts more than week, or gets better and then worse, it's time to see the doctor. If you have a persistent cough that won't go away, or you have severe facial pain with headache, it's time to see the doctor. Anytime someone younger than 6 months or over 70 is ill, they should be seen by a physician within a day or two.

Dr. Virginia Witt is a graduate of Duke University School of Medicine (class of 1997), and is a specialist in Family Medicine, having graduated from St. Joseph's Family Practice Residency Program in 2000, an affiliate of Mt. Sinai School of Medicine. In addition to her practice at Hoboken Integrated Family Medicine, she is an Associate Professor of Clinical Medicine for the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey's Medical School, and is also a hospitalist and clinical instructor at Christ Hospital's Family Practice Residency Program in Jersey City, NJ.