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IS IT A FLU OR A COLD?

How can I tell if I have a cold or the flu?

A cold and the flu have many of the same symptoms. But a cold is generally mild, while the flu tends to be more severe.

A cold often starts with feeling tired, sneezing, coughing and a runny nose. You may not have a fever or you may run a low fever - just a degree or two higher than usual. You may also have muscle aches, a scratchy or sore throat, watery eyes and a headache. As the cold worsens, your nasal mucus may turn from thin and watery to yellow and thick. Your symptoms may vary with each cold.

A cold usually lasts three or four days but can last up to 10 days. Many adults will have at least one or two colds a year, and most children will have five to eight. Colds are most common during months when people tend to gather indoors, such as in the winter.

The flu, which is a nickname for the influenza virus, starts suddenly and hits hard. Your fever may go as high as 40° C (105° F). You'll probably feel weak and tired, and have a dry cough, a runny nose, chills, muscle aches, severe headache, eye pain and a sore throat. The fever may last for three to five days. After the flu goes away, you may still feel weak and tired or keep coughing for up to three weeks.

The flu is most common in winter and early spring. It often occurs in outbreaks. The flu virus changes often. About every 10 years it undergoes major changes, so that more severe outbreaks occur.

What causes colds and the flu?

Viruses. Over 100 different viruses can cause colds. The flu, on the other hand, is caused by just a few different viruses each year. That's why there's a vaccine for flu but not for colds.

What can I do to feel better?

There's no cure for a cold or the flu. All you can do to feel better is treat your symptoms while your body fights off the virus.

- Stay home and rest in bed, especially while you have a fever.
- Stop smoking and avoid second-hand smoke, which can make cold symptoms worse.

- Drink plenty of fluids like water and fruit juices.
- Try frozen flavored ice (Popsicles). Fluids will help loosen mucus. Fluids are also important if you have a fever because fever can dry up your body's fluids, which can lead to *dehydration*.
- Drink hot tea with lemon and honey to soothe a sore throat and help loosen the mucus in your nose. Eating chicken soup can also help loosen the mucus.
- Don't drink alcohol.
- Gargle with warm salt water a few times a day to relieve a sore throat (1 tsp. of salt in 1 cup of water). Throat spray or lozenges may also help relieve the pain.
- Suck on cough lozenges or hard candy to quiet a cough. Try to use ones low in sugar.
- If a child is too young to blow his or her own nose, use a suction bulb to remove the mucus. (A cold mist vaporizer may also help.)
- Use saline nose drops to help loosen mucus. These nose drops don't contain medicine, like decongestant nose drops do. Saline nose drops are like salt water and simply help moisten the tender skin in your nose (1/4 tsp. salt in 1 cup of water-cooled).

Should I take medicine for my cold or the flu?

Although Canadians spend more than \$300.2 million a year on over-the-counter cold remedies, none of these products can cure a cold or make it end sooner. Medicine can, however, help relieve some of your cold or flu symptoms.

Why won't antibiotics help treat a cold or the flu?

Antibiotics don't work against viruses. So they can't cure a cold or the flu. But antibiotics can be helpful if you get an infection from bacteria, such as a sinus infection, an ear infection or pneumonia (an infection in the lungs).

How can you avoid catching them?

Viruses are transmitted mainly by the hands, or by touching an item recently infected by another person. It is by rubbing your eyes with your hands or touching your face that the viruses can contaminate you.

References: Jean Coutu Academy in collaboration with Linson Pharma
If you like more information please call the Student Health Centre at 364-2163.