



Do you really have the “flu”?

Colds and flu are very common infections especially during the winter season. Most of us use the terms “flu” and “cold” interchangeably. After all, there’s no specific treatment for either. But how do you know if your sniffle is a common cold or a strain of influenza?

Colds and flu are caused by different viruses. However, the main difference between the common cold and the flu (influenza) is the severity of the symptoms.

Flu symptoms generally:

- Come on quickly and severely.
- Include fever, which tends to be higher and lasts longer than the occasional low-grade fever that may accompany a cold.
- Include body aches and severe tiredness or fatigue.

Common cold symptoms:

- Gradually get worse over a few days
- Are more likely to include runny or stuffy nose than the flu
- Often include a sore throat, while flu rarely does
- May cause tiredness, but it is much less severe than the exhaustion that comes with the flu
- Do not usually result in serious health problems and hospitalisations
- Tests are available to diagnose the flu but there are no such tests for colds

Can you prevent colds and flu?

Colds and flu are both “droplet spread”. Someone with a cold or flu who coughs or sneezes, passes minute droplets into the air containing the virus. If they cover their mouth or nose with their hands, they can then touch a surface or object, which you then touch, passing the virus along.

Good hygiene (hand washing) is essential to preventing the spread of viruses, but not a guarantee.

The influenza vaccine can prevent almost 70% of flu. However, there is no vaccine for the common cold. The flu vaccine needs to be used every year to be effective (you can’t have it once and remain protected for life.)

How does the treatment of colds and flu differ?

The treatment of colds and flu is quite similar. Bed rest, plenty of fluids and medications to treat fever and pain are usually used. There are many “home remedies” for viral infections.

Secondary bacterial infections are treated with antibiotics, but their use is controversial. Viral infections do not benefit from antibiotic use and only encourage resistant organisms.

Severe cases of flu may need hospitalisation for support and treatment. Flu can cause complications such as pneumonia which can be life-threatening in severe cases.

The anti-viral medication Tamiflu (Oseltamivir Phosphate) has only recently become available in many countries. The medication can be used to treat severe cases of flu, but must be taken within 2 days of the onset of symptoms. Tamiflu does not work for colds.

While anti-viral drugs like Tamiflu can be used to treat flu, their widespread use is not recommended. Use of the flu vaccine is still considered to be the most important method of flu prevention.

This winter, whether you have a cold or the flu, your best bet is to stay snuggled up in bed with tissues and a glass of water at hand until you feel better.

