

Cold vs. Flu: What is It?



Knowing the difference between a cold and flu can be most important for both their prevention and treatment. Because they share some similar symptoms in the same seasons, they often run together in our minds.

The Common Cold

The common cold is the most prevalent infectious disease with over 200 different types of associated viruses, such as Rhinoviruses (nose viruses), Respiratory Syncytial Viruses (RSV) and a host of others.

The primary symptoms of a cold are centered around the nose (stuffy, runny nose, sneezing) and can spread throughout the head. Throat irritation without redness can be involved. Generally there is mild to no fever. There can also be headache, cough, burning eyes, some muscle aches and decreased appetite.

The Flu

Flu symptoms come on more suddenly, are more intense, and originate from a single family of viruses (Influenza viruses).

Flu symptoms classically include fever of 102-106 degrees, with children experiencing the higher end. Chills, muscle aches, exhaustion, flushed face, headaches, and vomiting or diarrhea may occur.

Symptoms commonly appear in 2-3 days of exposure, usually from inhaling airborne droplets from coughs or sneezes. The primary symptoms last 4 to 7 days with a lingering cough and tiredness that may last weeks.

Summary of Key Differentials

FLU	COLD
Sudden Onset	Slower onset
More extreme symptoms	Less extreme symptoms
Can't get out of bed	Can function normally in daily routines
Fever, chills, aches, exhaustion	More nasal congestion
May last 2 weeks or more	May last one week