

Do You Know the Difference Between a Cold or the Flu?



You're coughing and sneezing, but do you have a cold or the flu? The symptoms can be similar, so use the chart below to help determine what's making you sick.

If your symptoms are severe or you think you have the flu, see your doctor. When you are ill, you may not feel like going to the doctor. If that's the case, don't forget, if you're an Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield member, you can use the LiveHealth Online doctors and get treatment from your bed, if you have an internet device with a camera.

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	Usual; high (100°F to 102°F, occasionally higher, especially in young children); lasts 3 to 4 days.
Headache	Rare	Common
Ache and pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
Fatigue, weakness	Sometimes	Usual; at the beginning of the illness
Exhaustion	Never	Sometimes
Stuffy nose	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest pain, cough	Mild to moderate; hacking cough	Common; can become severe

Treatment	The only things that help are symptomatic treatments with rest, plenty of fluids, and acetaminophen or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen. Children should not receive aspirin for any condition before they are 12 years old. Antihistamines and decongestants, common ingredients in over-the-counter cold medicines have not been shown to help most people.	Antiviral drugs may help but must be started early. These are especially recommended for persons at risk for flu complications including pregnant women. Everyone may benefit from symptomatic treatments such as rest, plenty of fluids and acetaminophen or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen for pain and fever. Children must not take aspirin for flu because it could cause a serious complication. Antihistamines and decongestants, common ingredients in over-the-counter cold medicines have not been shown to help most people.
Prevention	Wash your hands often with soap and water; avoid close contact with anyone with a cold.	Yearly vaccination; antiviral drugs – see your doctor.
Complications	Sinus congestion, middle ear infection, asthma	Bronchitis, pneumonia; can worsen chronic conditions; can be life-threatening. Complications more likely in the elderly, those with chronic conditions, young children and pregnant women.

How to Treat a Cough From a Cold or the Flu

You can't cure colds or the flu, but you can relieve the cough and sore throat that sometimes come with them.

Use cough drops or hard candy. Menthol and certain herbal cough drops can slightly numb and soothe your sore throat. But sucking on plain hard candy may work just as well.

Try a teaspoon of honey. This traditional remedy for sore throat may help soothe coughs, too. Try adding a spoonful to your tea, but don't give honey to kids under 1 year old.

Drink up. Sipping on drinks will keep your throat moist and comfortable. When your throat doesn't hurt, you may not cough. Just about any drink is OK except alcohol or caffeinated drinks. Those can dry you out. Also avoid orange juice and other citrus drinks if they bother your throat.

Heat up that drink. Sip some warm tea or chicken soup to heat up your airways. Not only will it hydrate you, but the warmth helps break up mucus and makes it easier to cough up.

Use cough medicine. Sometimes you need to cough to get out nasty mucus. But other times you need to calm your cough, like when you want to sleep. Over-the-counter cough medicine can help. Expectorants help you cough up mucus. Cough suppressants reduce your urge to cough. If you're not sure which kind you need, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Use a decongestant. These over-the-counter meds can help clear your stuffy nose. If postnasal drip is irritating your throat and making you cough, decongestants may help both your throat and cough. Be careful: While cold and cough medicines are fine for adults and older kids, they are not safe for children under age 4.

Breathe in steam. If a raw, dry throat is making you cough, moisture may help. Try breathing in steam from a hot shower. Or use a humidifier or vaporizer in your room while you sleep. The steam can keep your nose and throat from being too dry and get rid of that back-of-the-throat tickle. The moisture can also ease your breathing and loosen mucus, helping you cough it up.

Avoid dirty air. You know smoke isn't good for you, but it's especially bad when you're sick. It can really irritate your cough. Don't smoke, and stay away from others who are smoking.

Rest. If you want to get rid of your cold and cough, you need to take it easy. Your body needs energy to fight off the virus. Push yourself too hard, and it will just exhaust you and stress you out. That can make your cold, cough, and sore throat hang around longer.

Gargle with salt water. Does this traditional remedy really work? Studies haven't shown that it does, but lots of people swear by it. See if it helps you. Mix a teaspoon of salt in 8 ounces of warm water and gargle. Do it several times a day.

Eat a frozen treat. Want to cool down a flaming sore throat? Numb the pain with ice pops, sorbet, or ice cream, or suck on ice chips.

Use an over-the-counter painkiller. Acetaminophen, and can help with sore throat pain. is fine for adults, but it could be dangerous to children under age 18.

Try a throat spray or lozenge. Some have a drug that helps soothe and numb the throat. They can give you temporary sore throat relief. Just don't let children use them unless a doctor says it's safe.

When to See a Doctor

You don't need medical care for the average cough or sore throat. You often just need to give your body time to recover. Most are caused by viruses, which antibiotics can't treat.

But some coughs and sore throats do need help from a doctor. You could be dealing with something more serious.

If you have a cough with any of these symptoms, see a doctor:

- Shortness of breath
- Coughing up blood, bloody mucus, or pink foamy mucus
- Coughing up green, tan, or yellow mucus
- Fever, chills, or chest pain when you breathe deeply

If you have a sore throat that lasts longer than a week or a sore throat with any of these symptoms, see a doctor:

- Severe pain
- Trouble swallowing
- Fever over 103 F in adults
- Swollen glands
- White patches on your throat or tonsils
- Rash

These are signs that it might be a bacterial infection like strep throat, which can be treated with antibiotics. Or it could be another condition, like acid reflux, and you may need other treatments.

SOURCES: American Academy of Family Physicians: "Sore Throat Treatment," "Sore Throat Symptoms," "Sore Throat Causes & Risk Factors," "Colds and the Flu: Treatment," "Cough Medicine: Understanding Your OTC Options," "Cough." Lisa M. Asta, MD, spokeswoman, American Academy of Pediatrics; associate clinical professor of pediatrics, University of California, San Francisco. CDC: "Get Smart: Know When Antibiotics Work: Sore Throat," "Get Smart: Know When Antibiotics Work: Symptom Relief." Norman H. Edelman, MD, chief medical officer, American Lung Association; professor of medicine, State University of New York at Stony Brook. HealthyChildren.org: "Coughs and Colds: Medicines or Home Remedies?" National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: "Alcohol and the Immune System," "Harmful Interactions: Mixing Alcohol with Medicines." National Health Service: "Treating a Cough." Paul, I. Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, December 2007. UpToDate: "Symptomatic relief of sore throat in children and adolescents," "Symptomatic treatment of acute pharyngitis in adults."

Reviewed by [Neha Pathak, MD](#) on 9/30/2018

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