Geisinger

Symptoms of the cold, flu, allergies and COVID can be similar. Here's how to spot the difference.

Cold, allergies or COVID-19?

Symptom	Cold	Allergies	COVID-19
Dry cough	Sometimes	Sometimes	Yes
Fever	Sometimes	No	Yes
Runny nose	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
Sneezing	Yes	Yes	No
Sore throat	Yes	No	Sometimes
Diarrhea	No	No	Sometimes
Body aches	Sometimes	No	Yes
Fatigue	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes
Headache	Sometimes	Sometimes	Yes
Shortness of breath	No	Yes	Yes
New loss of taste or smell	No	Sometimes	Yes

Yes = ✔   No = ✘   Sometimes = ✚

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We've all been there. You wake up with a sore throat, then come the aches and the congestion that feels like it may cause your head to explode.

Is it a cold or allergies? Or something worse, like the flu — or even COVID-19? Should you see your healthcare provider, or just stay home and get rest?

"While a cold and the flu have similar symptoms, the flu is much more severe and can result in serious health problems," says Dr. Richard Martin, a family medicine physician at [Geisinger Mt. Pleasant](#) in Scranton. "Add allergies and COVID-19, and it can be even more complex to know whether you should call your doctor or get a COVID test."

Let's take a look at how to spot the difference and get you on the road to recovery ASAP.

What are the symptoms of a cold?

Cold symptoms come on gradually and are milder than symptoms of the flu. Symptoms commonly include:

- Cough
- Mild fever (more common in children)
- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Sore throat
- Stuffy nose

Cold symptoms typically last for about a week. However, you're contagious during the first few days, so stay home, get plenty of fluids and be sure to rest.

"Most colds are caused by a virus - which antibiotics won't treat. It's best to get plenty of rest, fluids and use over-the-counter medicines to help manage symptoms," says Dr. Martin.

If your symptoms last longer than a week, check with your healthcare provider to rule out an allergy or bacterial infection.

What are the symptoms of flu?

Flu symptoms are often severe and come on quickly. If you have a fever and body or muscle aches right away, you may have the flu virus. Symptoms commonly include:

- Aches
- Chest discomfort, cough
- Chills
- Extreme tiredness/fatigue
- Headache
- High fever
- Sometimes nausea and diarrhea

Most symptoms improve over the course of a few days, but you'll likely feel run down for a week or two. The flu is caused by the influenza virus, which leaves you contagious for a few days, so it's important to stay home and rest.

If you suspect you or a loved one have the flu, be aware of your risk of developing serious health issues. "The flu can lead to serious health problems like pneumonia, especially in people who are young, elderly or have heart or lung problems," says Dr. Martin.

As with the common cold, antibiotics won't help your flu symptoms, but getting rest, fluids and using over-the-counter medicines can help ease your symptoms.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe an antiviral medication, which can help you feel better sooner and may prevent complications like pneumonia.

What are the symptoms of allergies?

Allergy symptoms range in severity from person to person, can be stronger at certain times of the year and aren't contagious.

"For example, someone who suffers from allergies may have their worst symptoms during the summer months, when it's hotter and plants and grasses pollinate," says Dr. Martin. They can also be caused by normal things in your environment — think pollen, dust, pet dander and mold.

Allergy symptoms can include:

- Sneezing
- Itchy or watery eyes
- Itchy nose, ears or throat
- Cough or a tickle in the throat
- Stuffy or runny nose

- Hives
- Swelling

While allergies can be treated at home with over-the-counter or prescription antihistamines, decongestants and nasal steroid sprays, some allergies may require special treatment from your doctor.

If you think you may be suffering from allergies, talk with your doctor about your symptoms and the best treatments to help you manage them.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Like the flu, [COVID-19](#) is a respiratory illness, but it's caused by a different virus. Symptoms of COVID-19 can range from mild to severe, and may include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

Like most respiratory viruses, COVID-19 can be spread person-to-person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

"That's why it's important to take the recommended measures to protect yourself and others by getting vaccinated, washing your hands, avoiding touching your face and staying home if you're sick," says Dr. Martin.

If you have respiratory symptoms, [screen yourself](#). Based on your results, you can schedule a COVID test (if you have a myGeisinger account, you can self-schedule your test [here](#)). If you test positive, call your doctor.

"It's important to identify positive cases of COVID, so that we can take proactive measures in protecting our communities," says Dr. Martin.

How to prevent a cold, flu and COVID-19

For most people, having a cold, the flu or COVID doesn't require a trip to the emergency room. Most symptoms resolve after some much-needed rest, but that isn't always the case.

To decrease your chances of catching a cold, flu or COVID, remember to wash your hands frequently. Washing with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds (sing the "happy birthday" song twice) can help get rid of the germs on your skin.

Avoid contact with people who are sick. And if you become sick, stay home to keep from infecting others. "Remember, the best way to prevent the flu and COVID-19 is by getting vaccinated," says

Dr. Martin. The symptoms may be similar and having both viruses at one is possible. This is something you'll want to avoid, especially older adults, young children, and those with certain medical conditions.

https://www.geisinger.org/health-and-wellness/wellness-articles/2019/01/14/21/56/is-it-a-cold-or-the-flu?msdynttrid=_BpR3YnSwIrSsD895-Z2IygLhGroHX4c8KlJDB8VJJ0