

## Cold or flu? What to do when you're feeling blue

By *Teddi Dineley Johnson*

If you're feeling sneezy, sleepy, grumpy and dopey — definitely not happy — but haven't called the doc because you're too bashful to admit that you can't tell the difference between a cold and the flu, don't fret. First, give yourself a pat on the back — unless you're too achy — because you just named all of the Seven Dwarfs in a single sentence. Second, examine your symptoms. The common cold and seasonal flu are both respiratory illnesses, but they are caused by different viruses.

"In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness and dry cough are more common and intense," says Carolyn Bridges, MD, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases.

Colds are usually milder than the flu, Bridges says. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose, but colds generally do not result in serious health problems,



such as pneumonia, bacterial infections or hospitalizations.

But colds and flu share many similar symptoms, making it "difficult or even impossible to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone," says Bridges, who recommends that you contact your health care provider right away if you begin to develop flu-like symptoms.

Each year, about 5 percent to 20 percent of the U.S. population develops the flu, and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized because of flu complications. You're at greater risk for flu complications if you're ages 50 or older, a young child, pregnant or have a chronic medical condition such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease. Sadly, about 36,000 people in the United States die from flu complications each year.

A yearly flu vaccination is the single best way to lower your chances of getting the flu. If you get the vaccine but still get sick, the vaccine can make the bug milder. The best time to get vaccinated is in October or November, but because flu season can run from October to May, you can even get vaccinated months later.

There are two types of flu vaccine: the flu shot, which is approved for people older than 6 months, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions, and a nasal spray flu vaccine that's approved for use in healthy people ages 2 to 49 who are not pregnant. If you're allergic to eggs, have had a reaction to a flu shot in the past or are sick, talk with your health care provider before being vaccinated.

### The cold war

If you're looking for a vaccine for the common cold, forget it. Spend the time searching for a sale on tissue and washing your hands instead.

According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, colds are caused by more than 200 different viruses and are probably the most common illness known. Children get about six to 10 colds a year, but the number of colds you get will probably go down as you age and develop immunities. In



### How to tell apart colds and the flu

Symptom	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	Usual; high
Headache	Rare	Common
Aches, pains	Slight	Usual; severe
Stuffy nose	Common	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Cough	Moderate to mild; hacking	Common; can be severe

Source: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease  
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fact, people ages 60 and older get fewer than one cold a year.

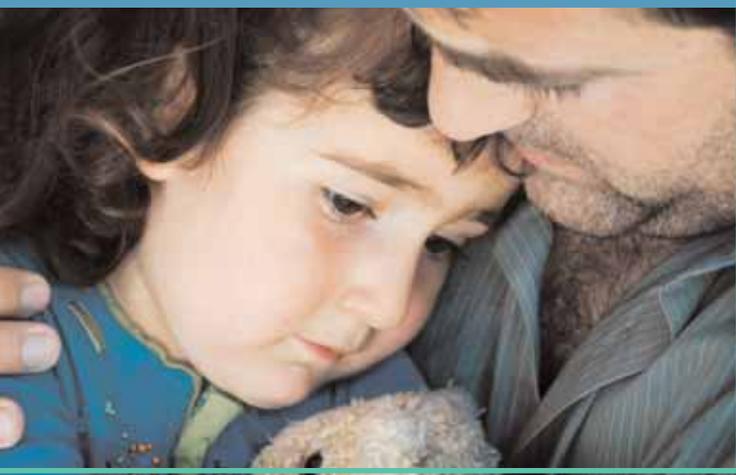
If you do get a cold or the flu, get as much rest as you can and stay home from work or school. Make yourself more comfortable by drinking lots of fluids, including water, juice and hot soups, but stay away from alcohol and caffeine, which can dehydrate you. And while chicken soup is said to be good for the soul, it's not likely to ease your symptoms, Bridges says. However, "good nutrition is an important part of the successful recovery from any illness, and it helps if it tastes good."

Over-the-counter medications can relieve your discomfort as well, but follow the instructions on the package and call your health care provider if you have questions about the ingredients. If you think you have the flu, call your doctor right away, especially if you're at higher risk of complications, as prescription antiviral medications started within the first 48 hours of the onset of flu symptoms can make your illness less serious.

### Caring for kids

>> If your little one gets sick, call the doctor and make sure she or he gets plenty of rest and lots of fluids. But never give over-the-counter cough and cold medicines to children younger than age 2.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, such medications can be very harmful and are ineffective. It's always a good idea to check with your health care provider before giving over-the-counter medications to children of any age. Also, never give aspirin or other salicylate-containing medications to children or teenagers who may have the flu. Young people can get sick or die from a rare condition called Reye's syndrome if they take these medicines while they have flu symptoms.



 **American Public Health Association**

>> For more tips on preventing colds or the flu, visit [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)

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