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## Colds and the Flu

### How can I tell if I have a cold or the flu?

Although the common cold and the flu share many similar symptoms, they are 2 different conditions.

The symptoms of a cold develop slowly and can include:

- Fever up to 102°F
- Runny or stuffy nose (often with green- or yellow-colored discharge)
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Sneezing
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches
- Headache
- Watery eyes

### What is H1N1 flu?

The H1N1 influenza (also called swine influenza or swine flu) is a respiratory infection caused by a virus found in pigs. H1N1 flu can infect humans. For more information, see [H1N1 Influenza](#).

Cold symptoms generally are milder than flu symptoms.

Flu symptoms usually appear suddenly and can include:

- Fever over 102°F
- Stuffy nose
- Nausea
- Chills and sweats
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches, especially in your back, arms and legs
- Cough
- Headache
- Loss of appetite

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### What causes colds and the flu?

Viruses cause colds and the flu. More than 200 different viruses can cause colds. Not as many viruses cause the flu. That's why there's a shot available for the flu and not for colds.

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## What can I do to feel better?

There's no cure for the common cold. All you can do to feel better is treat your symptoms while your body fights off the virus (see the box below).

For the flu, your doctor will probably recommend that you treat the symptoms until you feel better. In severe cases, your doctor may prescribe an antiviral medicine. Antiviral medicines can shorten the length of time you are sick with the flu. These medicines come as pills, syrup or in an inhaler. The inhaled type may cause problems for some people who have asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

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## Ways to treat your cold and flu symptoms

- Get plenty of rest, especially while you have a fever. Rest helps your body fight infection.
- Stop smoking and avoid secondhand smoke, which can make cold symptoms worse.
- Drink lots of fluids such as water and clear soups. Fluids help loosen mucus. Fluids are also important because they help prevent dehydration.
- Gargle with warm salt water a few times a day to relieve a sore throat. Throat sprays or lozenges may also help relieve the pain.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Use saline (salt water) nose drops to help loosen mucus and moisten the tender skin in your nose.

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## What over-the-counter medicines can I take for a cold or the flu?

Over-the-counter medicines cannot cure a cold or the flu. Medicine can, however, help relieve some of your cold or flu symptoms. Check with your doctor before giving any medicine to children or read our handout on [colds and the flu in children](#).

Many cold and flu products are available without a prescription. See the box below for a guide to the common ingredients in these products.

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## What's in over-the-counter cold and flu medicines?

The ingredients listed below are found in many cold and flu medicines. Read labels carefully. If you have questions, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

- **Analgesics** relieve aches and pains and reduce fever. Examples include acetaminophen, aspirin, ibuprofen, ketoprofen and naproxen. **Warning: Children and teenagers shouldn't be given aspirin because it can cause Reye's syndrome.**
- **Antitussives** (also called cough suppressants) tell your brain to stop coughing. Don't take an antitussive if you're coughing up mucus. **Warning: Children younger than 4 years of age shouldn't be given cough medicines.**
- **Expectorants** help thin mucus so it can be coughed up more easily.
- **Decongestant nasal sprays** shrink the nasal passages and reduce congestion. Adults should only use these medicines for a few days. Overuse can cause symptoms to get worse when

you stop using the nasal spray. **Warning: Children shouldn't use these medicines at all.**

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## Should I call my doctor?

In most cases, you don't need to see your doctor when you have a cold or the flu. However, if you have any of the symptoms in the box below, call your doctor.

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## Call your doctor if you have these cold and flu symptoms:

### In children:

- High fever (above 103°F), or a fever that lasts for more than 3 days
- Symptoms that last for more than 10 days
- Trouble breathing, fast breathing or wheezing
- Bluish skin color
- Earache or drainage from the ear
- Changes in mental state (such as not waking up, irritability or seizures)
- Flu-like symptoms that improve, but return with a fever and a worse cough
- Worsening of a chronic medical condition (such as diabetes or heart disease)
- Vomiting or abdominal pain

### In adults:

- A high, prolonged fever (above 102°F) with fatigue and body aches
- Symptoms that last for more than 10 days or get worse instead of better
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Fainting or feeling like you are about to faint
- Confusion or disorientation
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Severe sinus pain in your face or forehead
- Very swollen glands in the neck or jaw

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## Can I prevent catching a cold or the flu?

You can reduce your risk of catching a cold or the flu by washing your hands frequently, which stops the spread of germs. Eating healthy, exercising and getting enough sleep also play a part in preventing colds and the flu because they help boost your immune system.

The best way to avoid getting the flu is to get the influenza vaccine. You should get the vaccine when it becomes available each fall (in October or November), but you can also get it any time throughout the flu season (into December, January and beyond). The vaccine is available by shot or by nasal spray. The vaccines work by exposing your immune system to the flu virus. Your body will build up antibodies to the virus to protect you from getting the flu. The flu shot contains dead viruses. The nasal-spray vaccine contains live but weakened viruses. You cannot get the flu from the flu shot or the nasal-spray vaccine.

Some people who get the vaccine will still get the flu, but they will usually get a milder case than people who aren't vaccinated. The vaccine is especially recommended for people who are more likely to get really sick from flu-related complications.

If you are sick, make sure that you cover your mouth when you cough and wash your hands often to prevent giving your cold or flu to others.

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## Source

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