

Cold vs. Flu – Q and A

Hi I'm Darlene Morse, A nurse with the Department of Health and Human Services in the State of New Hampshire. It is the season for colds and flu – do you know the difference between the two?

Today we're talking about the common cold versus influenza or the flu...

Q: Darlene, if you could start by telling us just what causes the flu?

A: Influenza is caused by a virus, and it's often called the influenza virus or some people abbreviate it and call it the flu.

Q: What type of symptoms might accompany the flu that somebody would be experiencing?

A: Typical symptoms for the flu are fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, headache, body aches, chills, fatigue and in children you may see some nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

Q: How are those symptoms that people would experience with the flu different from a cold?

A: When people experience symptoms from a cold, which is also a virus, they may have some limited symptoms like a cough, a runny nose or a sore throat.

Q. Everybody has heard someone say "Oh, I had the flu," but really they had a cold, so with the symptoms somewhat similar, how can someone who is ill tell the difference between those two?

A. When someone has influenza usually it's very sudden onset. That person may develop a high fever and they're very, very rundown. They're very sick. They're achy they don't feel well they may have cough, they may have runny nose. They just don't feel well and they may be extremely exhausted because they're body is trying to battle the flu. When someone has a cold, the cold is kind of a gradual onset. You may start out with just a runny nose but then the symptoms progress, and you develop a cough, maybe a sore throat, maybe not. Typically a sore throat comes with a cold but once in a great while you may see it with the flu.

Q. This is the time of year when we typically start hearing about people experiencing the flu, but also they're getting colds. Is this peak flu season?

A. The flu season runs from usually October to March, roughly. This particular year it's been kind of a lesser flu season, we haven't seen as many cases. But it's always good to be on the alert, to get your vaccines, to be prepared for the influenza season. You can still get your flu vaccine right up through March and sometimes into April if your provider has it.

Q. What types of treatment are available for either of these illnesses?

A. So if you are being treated for influenza, the vaccine is always available to be pro-active and get your flu vaccine will avoid you getting sick and getting your family sick. For a cold, there is no vaccine at all. So, it's always good to be prepared and get vaccinated. Treatment for the flu is usually staying hydrated, getting plenty of rest, taking care of those symptoms of the flu. With a cold it's more short-lived than the flu virus so you're going to take care of those symptoms with cough

syrup or throat lozenges or whatever helps to alleviate those symptoms.

Q. So, you just spoke about the vaccine, that's available for....

A. Vaccine is available for anyone that is 6 months or older. Children often if they have never had a flu vaccine before will require two vaccines. But once they've had those two vaccines initially the next year they only get one. So everyone has the opportunity to be vaccinated and protect themselves and their family from the flu.

Q. And again, cold, it's more or less you have to let it run its course.

A. Cold you have to let it run its course. You need to make sure that you take medications, stay home from school or work if you're sick. I know everyone thinks they're valuable in their job or at school, but you need to stay home and take care of yourself so you're not making everyone else sick.

There are some measures that you can do when you're dealing with the flu or cold, one is to stay hydrated. The other is if you're coughing or sneezing make sure you cough or sneeze into your sleeve because that helps avoid spreading germs to other people because it's a droplet and it's out there in the air for a certain amount of time and then it drops down. So, coughing into your sleeve is going to be one of your advantages to avoid spreading the illness. The other thing is washing your hands. It sounds very simple but hand washing is key to avoid spreading illness no matter what illness you're talking about hand washing is going to help avoid making you sick and making other people sick.

Q. Any other preventative measures for folks?

A. Get plenty of rest and hydration and make sure you keep yourself healthy. We hope everyone has a safe and healthy winter.