

Cold Versus Flu

What is the difference between a cold and the flu?

The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. Because these two types of illnesses have similar flu-like symptoms, it can be difficult to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. 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. Colds are usually milder than the flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations.

How can you tell the difference between a cold and the flu?

Because colds and flu share many symptoms, it can be difficult (or even impossible) to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. Special tests that usually must be done within the first few days of illness can be carried out, when needed to tell if a person has the flu.

What are the symptoms of the flu versus the symptoms of a cold?

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. Colds are usually milder than the flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations.

Flu Facts

- Flu is spread with a person who has the flu coughs or sneezes
- Flu symptoms include fever, headache, chills, body aches, tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, and stuffy nose.
- If you get the flu, rest and drink plenty of liquids. Do not drink alcohol or smoke.
- Antibiotics like penicillin will not cure the flu. Anti-viral medicines such as Tamiflu and Relenza are effective in treating the flu in most cases.
- Over-the-counter medicines may relieve flu symptoms. Try acetaminophen (Tylenol®) for children; aspirin or acetaminophen for adults. Decongestants, cough medicines and the use of a humidifier may also help.

Call the Virginia Department of Health's Swine Flu Hotline at 877-CALL-VDH3 (or 877-275-8343) or visit www.cdc.gov/swineflu for more information.

(Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)