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Spring maybe just around the corner, but not the end to cold, flu season

By Physician Assistant Diane Greenblatt

Although we are seeing signs of spring here in the valley, the calendar and the groundhog both say winter is still with us. And as the cold and flu season usually lasts until May, let's talk about colds and the flu while we are waiting for spring to fully bloom.

Overview

The common cold is a viral infection of the upper respiratory tract, which is made up of your nose and throat. Although it can make you feel lousy for about week, it is usually harmless.

Influenza, the flu, is also a viral infection, but it attacks your respiratory *system*, made up of your nose, throat *and* lungs. Its complications can be serious.

Sinus infection, or sinusitis, is an inflammation of the tissue lining the sinuses. This swelling interferes with drainage and causes mucus to build up.



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Symptoms

Cold symptoms include sore throat, cough, headache, stuffy nose, sneezing, fatigue, low-grade fever, between 99 and 101 degrees.

With a sinus infection, the area around your eyes and face may feel swollen, and you may have throbbing facial pain, a worsening headache, slight dizziness when shifting position, bad breath, thick yellow or green mucus draining from your nose or down the back of your throat (postnasal drip), and a decreased sense of smell.

The flu initially may seem like a common cold. However, colds usually develop slowly, while the flu tends to come on suddenly. And although a cold can be an annoyance, you usually feel much worse with the flu. Common signs and symptoms of the flu include fever of over 100 degrees; aching muscles, especially in your back, arms and legs; chills and sweats; headache, dry cough, fatigue and weakness. Most flu symptoms gradually improve over two to five days, but it's not uncommon to feel run down for a week or more.

Treatment

Because the common cold and the flu are caused by viruses, antibiotics won't help. But over-the-counter medications may make you feel better. Remedies should target specific symptoms. A neti pot helps thin mucus and flush out your sinuses with a mix of distilled water and salt. Get plenty of fluids and plenty of rest.

For the flu, placing a cool, damp washcloth on the forehead, arms, and legs to reduce discomfort associated with a fever. Put a humidifier in the room to make breathing easier. Gargle with salt water (1:1 ratio warm water to salt) to soothe a sore throat and cover up with a warm blanket to calm chills.

With a sinus infection, bacteria may start to grow in the fluids that do not drain from the nose so you may need to see your provider for a course of antibiotics. Sinus irrigation can help ease your symptoms while you wait for the antibiotics to do their job. Steroids, decongestants, and over-the-counter mucus thinners can also ease your discomfort. In some cases, acute sinusitis can turn into chronic sinus infection.

Does one condition lead to others?

After a cold, you are at greater risk of developing a sinus infection because a cold causes inflammation and swelling of the sinuses. Swelling obstructs the sinus openings and prevents mucus from draining normally, causing facial pain and other sinusitis symptoms.

Colds and the flu are caused by different viruses, so colds do not lead to the flu. However, the flu can lead to more serious conditions such as viral or bacterial pneumonia, muscle inflammation, central nervous system disease, and heart problems including heart attacks, inflammation of the heart muscle (myocarditis), and inflammation of the sac around the heart (pericarditis).

The people at higher risk of developing flu complications include young children, older adults, pregnant women, people with weakened immune systems, and people who have chronic illnesses.

When Should I call the My Provider?

It's important to call your doctor if you also have any of the following severe symptoms:

- **Persistent fever:** Can be a sign of a bacterial infection that should be treated.
- **Painful swallowing:** Although a sore throat from a cold or flu can cause mild discomfort, severe pain could mean strep throat, which requires treatment by a provider.
- **Persistent coughing:** When a cough doesn't go away after two or three weeks, it could be bronchitis, which may need an antibiotic.

In some cases, emergency medical attention is needed if the following symptoms occur:

- Severe chest pain
- Severe headache
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Persistent vomiting

In children, additional signs of an emergency are:

- Extreme irritability or distress
- Difficulty breathing or rapid breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Lethargy and failure to interact normally
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Symptoms that were improving and then suddenly worsen
- Fever with a rash

How to help prevent the flu or colds

The most important prevention measure for preventing colds and flu is frequent hand washing. Hand washing by rubbing the hands with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds helps to take germs off the skin.

In addition to hand washing, I recommend you get a flu vaccine to prevent seasonal influenza.

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