

Is It a Cold or the Flu?

Your child is sent home from school with a sore throat, cough, and high fever — could it be the flu that's been going around? Or just a common cold?

Although the flu (or influenza) usually causes symptoms that make someone feel worse than symptoms associated with a common cold, it's not always easy to tell the difference between the two.

Symptoms Guide

The answers to these questions can help determine whether a child is fighting the flu or combating a cold:

Flu vs. Colds: A Guide to Symptoms

Questions

	Flu	Cold
Was the onset of illness ...	sudden?	slow?
Does your child have a ...	high fever?	no (or mild) fever?
Is your child's exhaustion level ...	severe?	mild?
Is your child's head ...	achy?	headache-free?
Is your child's appetite ...	decreased?	normal?
Are your child's muscles ...	achy?	fine?
Does your child have ...	chills?	no chills?

If most of your answers fell into the first category, chances are that your child has the flu. If your answers were usually in the second category, it's most likely a cold.

But don't be too quick to brush off your child's illness as just another cold. The important thing to remember is that flu symptoms can vary from child to child (and they can change as the illness progresses), so if you suspect the flu, call the doctor. Even doctors often need a test to tell them for sure if a person has the flu or not since the symptoms can be so similar!

Some bacterial diseases, like strep throat or pneumonia, also can look like the flu or a cold. It's important to get medical attention immediately if your child seems to be getting worse, is having any trouble breathing, has a high fever, has a bad headache, has a sore throat, or seems confused. While even healthy kids can have complications of the flu, kids with certain medical conditions are at more of a risk. If you think your child might have the flu, contact your doctor.

Treatment

Some kids with chronic medical conditions may become sicker with the flu and need to be hospitalized, and flu in an infant also can be dangerous. For severely ill kids or those with other special circumstances, doctors may prescribe an antiviral medicine that can ease flu symptoms, but only if it's given within 48 hours of the onset of the flu.

Most of the time, you can care for your child by offering plenty of fluids, rest, and extra comfort. And if the doctor says it's not the flu? Ask whether your child should get a flu shot.

Tips for Treating the Flu

Unlike some other infections, when the flu is uncomplicated, it doesn't usually require medical treatment. Your doctor may prescribe an antiviral medicine (if symptoms are reported within 48 hours of onset), but these usually only shorten the course of the infection by just 1 or 2 days, and most times are only used when a child is at risk for serious complications.

Here's how to help your child feel better in the meantime:

Offer plenty of fluids (fever, which can be associated with the flu, can lead to dehydration). If your child is tired of drinking plain water, try ice pops, icy drinks mixed in a blender, and soft fruits (like melons or grapes) to maintain hydration.

Encourage your child to rest in bed or on the couch, with a supply of magazines, books, quiet music, and perhaps a favorite movie.

Give acetaminophen or ibuprofen for aches and pains (but do **not** give aspirin unless your doctor directs you to do so).

Dress your child in layers so you can add and remove layers during bouts of chills or fever.

Ask a close relative or faraway friend to call and help lift your child's spirits.

Take care of yourself and the other people in your family! If you haven't done so, ask your doctor whether you (and other family members) should get a flu shot. Also, wash your hands thoroughly and often, especially after picking up used tissues.

If your doctor recommends a prescription medicine to ease symptoms, be sure to call before you go to the pharmacy. Because the flu can strongly affect many areas of the United States, many pharmacies may have difficulty keeping certain medicines in stock