



## WRITING SAMPLE

Publication: GateHouse Media

Publish date: March 2019

---

# Really Bad Cold or the Flu? Here's How to Tell

By Gretchen Heber

When you're sick with fever, runny nose, cough and other miserable symptoms, you may wonder whether it's a cold or the flu that's laid you low. Both are caused by different viruses, and each can wreak various types of torment on our bodies.

It can be difficult to tell the difference between the two illnesses, but it is important to determine which you have because treatment will likely be required for the flu, while you might just have to tough it out if you're sick with a cold.

### How to tell the difference

The first thing to consider is the speed of onset. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the flu generally comes on very quickly, whereas cold symptoms develop more slowly. Next, the flu is usually accompanied by a fever, whereas a cold rarely raises body temperature. Similarly, the chills that can go along with a fever will be present with the flu, but probably not with a common cold.

The CDC also reports that fatigue and weakness often go hand-in-hand with flu, but not so much with a cold. On the other hand, sneezing, stuffy nose and sore throat are major indicators of a cold, but are actually less common with flu. Chest discomfort and cough, however, are quite common for flu sufferers, and are often present in colds, too, so that's not a good indicator of your diagnosis.

"Flu activity most commonly peaks in the United States between December and February," according to the CDC, though flu season usually runs from October to May. It's possible to be infected even outside this time frame also.

The best determinant of your particular illness is a flu test. When you visit a doctor with flu-like symptoms, they may run a "rapid flu test" right then and there, and then send off your nasal swab to a lab for further, more-conclusive testing.

## **Seek treatment for more serious illnesses**

If you have a fever that lasts more than three days, it's recommended that you seek treatment. A persistent high temperature can be a sign of a bacterial infection that can be treated. A painful sore throat is also a good reason to seek professional help, as severe pain can be a sign of strep throat, which also needs medical treatment.

Similarly, if your family is tired of hearing you constantly cough all day and night for weeks, it might be time to see a doctor. You could have bronchitis, which can be treated with antibiotics. Also keep an eye out for prolonged congestion of the sinus passages; this can lead to a sinus infection, for which you should also probably see a doctor. Your physician can determine whether you have a bacterial infection.

## **Prevention is critical**

Avoiding both of these illnesses altogether is the best option, of course, and there are a few ways to do that.

Stay away from sick people, of course, so you don't contract a cold or the flu. Keep sick children home from school, and sick adults should stay away from work.

Experts recommend thorough and repeated handwashing as one of the best ways to prevent the spread of colds and flu.

Flu shots are another way to prevent influenza infections. Each year, experts review strains of the flu that are predicted to be prevalent and develop immunizations against those particular strains. Get immunizations for yourself and your family members in early October to help defend against influenza.

Whether you have the flu or a cold may seem a moot point when you're lying miserable in bed, missing your daughter's ballet recital or that crucial meeting at work. But it's important to know the differences between the illnesses and to seek treatment if you suspect what's got you down and out is something more serious than a mild cold.