

Harris County  


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**HCPHES**  


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Public Health & Environmental Services

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## IS IT A COLD OR THE FLU?

It's cold and flu season again! Understanding the difference between having a cold and having the flu can help determine the proper treatment plan to bring you the most comfort.

**Cold** The first symptoms of a cold are usually a scratchy, sore throat, followed by sneezing and a runny nose. Your temperature is usually normal or only slightly elevated. A mild cough may develop.

**Flu** Flu symptoms usually develop fairly quickly and include a headache, dry cough and chills. The symptoms rapidly become worse than those of a cold. In fact, it can make you feel like you have been "knocked-off-your-feet," with muscle aches in the back and legs. A general feeling of tiredness and weakness may last for days or even weeks.

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
fever	rare	high (102-104 F); lasts 3-4 days
headache	rare	severe
general aches and pains	slight	usual and often severe
fatigue, weakness, tiredness	quite mild	Early and severe, can last up to 2-3 weeks
stuffy nose	common	sometimes
sneezing	usual	sometimes
sore throat	common	sometimes
chest discomfort; cough	sometimes; dry, choking cough	common; can become severe

To help you feel better while you are sick, remember to get plenty of rest and drink plenty of fluids. If needed, use a humidifier to soothe dry air passages. Your health care professional will determine the right treatment or medicine for your symptoms.

Most people do not have to call their doctor right away if they are experiencing signs of a cold or flu. However, the elderly, persons with respiratory problems, pregnant women, persons with weakened immune systems and children under age 2 who have not been vaccinated should see their health care professional when flu symptoms first begin. Everyone should see their health care provider if their symptoms get worse, last a long time or develop vomiting, high fever, chest pains or coughing with thick, yellow-green mucus.

### Important Flu Facts

- The single best way to protect yourself and your loved ones from the flu is to get a flu shot every year.
- Each year, 25 to 50 million people in the U.S. are infected with a seasonal flu illness. Of those, about 36,000 people die and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized due to the flu.
- Healthy adults may infect others **1 day before** getting symptoms and up to **5 days after** getting sick. So, it is possible to give someone the flu before you know you are sick as well as while you are sick.
- In some people, the flu can cause serious complications, including bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes.
- Recent studies have shown that children less than 2 years old are more likely than older children to end up in the hospital with serious complications if they get influenza (the flu).
- Those at greatest risk for complications from the flu are children and adults with chronic health conditions, people 65 or older, and pregnant women.
- Practice good health habits such as covering your cough and washing your hands often to help prevent respiratory illnesses like colds and flu.

For more information, visit [www.hcphes.org](http://www.hcphes.org) or [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).

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