

Is it a cold or an allergy?

March 30 2023, by Lori Barrette



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That first sneeze and snuffle prompts you to reach for a tissue. The second and third—perhaps fourth and fifth—may send you to the medicine chest for relief. But, is it a cold? Or is it a spring allergy?

Sorting that out is a challenge, says UR Medicine Primary Care's Dr. Lou Papa. It's especially tricky at this time of year, when colds are common and long-awaited blooms can be bothersome. And of course, since the U.S. arrival of COVID in 2020, you need to consider COVID-19 since it's a [respiratory virus](#) that can cause similar symptoms—but is far more contagious and could be a serious illness for certain folks or their loved ones. You should test for COVID-19 and contact your physician if it is positive to see if you need to be considered for any other therapies and directions on isolation.

However, once COVID has been ruled out, here are some symptom-sorting facts:

- It's probably a cold if your [runny nose](#), coughing and [sore throat](#) come on quickly, followed by an icky, achy feeling. Colds are caused by a virus, which you catch from other people. Cold symptoms usually subside after seven to 10 days. If they linger longer, or get worse rather than better, consider calling your doctor.
- It may be an [allergy](#) if your symptoms—sneezing along with itchy eyes and nose—are more predictable and they wax and wane a bit. You don't catch allergies from other people. They're triggered by something in your environment, like pollen, pet dander or dust, and sometimes specific foods. Allergy symptoms

can last for weeks or months at a time, depending on what's in bloom and in the air. And allergies can develop at any age. If this describes how you're feeling, consider seeing an allergist.

Whether it's a cold or allergies, over-the-counter medications can be your first step to quell symptoms. These tend to work well for most people. When choosing medications, read labels carefully and be aware that some contain ingredients that can make you sleepy. While they may be effective, the drowsiness they bring may impact your functioning during the day. If you do a lot of driving or work with heavy equipment, be safe and choose the non-drowsy medications.

A special word of caution if you have [high blood pressure](#): Consult your doctor before taking any over-the-counter cold or sinus medications. This is especially important for people who have [heart disease](#) or prostate issues, as well as anyone who has had a stroke.

Colds and allergies usually pass with time. But, if medicines aren't effective, the symptoms worsen and you start wheezing or have difficulty breathing, call your doctor. These may be signs of asthma or a respiratory infection.

Provided by University of Rochester Medical Center

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