

# Cold vs. allergies: Which do you have? Here's how to tell the difference

May 9 2023, by Ann Schreiber

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As the seasons change and the weather shifts, it's not uncommon to

experience symptoms like sneezing, coughing and congestion.

But how do you know if you're dealing with a common cold or allergies? The two can have similar symptoms, making it tough to tell an allergy from a cold. Here, experts offer tips on how to discern the difference.

## **Cold vs. allergy symptoms: What are the differences?**

Understanding allergy versus [cold symptoms](#) is vital in determining which one you're dealing with. While the two can share some similarities, there are also some differences to watch out for.

Based on information from the [Mayo Clinic](#) and [Atlantic Health System](#), here's a list of common symptoms of a cold and allergies to help you differentiate between the two:

Symptoms of a common cold include:

- Runny or stuffy nose
- Congestion
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Sneezing
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Body aches

Symptoms of allergies include:

- Runny or stuffy nose
- Sneezing
- Itchy or watery eyes
- Congestion

- Postnasal drip
- Headache
- Fatigue

"Both allergies and colds can cause [inflammatory responses](#) in the nasal passages and upper airways," Dr. Gabrielle Samuels, a doctor of osteopathic medicine with Atlantic Health System, said in a recent article. "Inflammation in these areas can lead to similar symptoms, even though the causes might be very different."

There are, however, some symptoms that are unique to each condition. With allergies, you may see watery, itchy eyes and an itchy throat. Generally, itchiness can be a sign of allergies, Samuels said.

## **Cold vs. allergies: How do I know what I have?**

You know the feeling, you start sneezing and sniffing, and before you know it, you're busting open a box of tissues. As the hours pass and the symptoms worsen, it's not unusual to head to the medicine cabinet in search of cold medicine for relief. But in the back of your head, you might be wondering, especially if spring or summer has arrived, is what I am feeling a cold? Or is it allergies?

"Sorting that out is a challenge," said Dr. Louis Papa, a professor of clinical medicine at the University of Rochester, in New York. It's especially tricky at this time of year, when colds are common and long-awaited blooms can be bothersome. In a [recent article from the University of Rochester Medical Center](#), Papa notes that COVID-19 has made differentiating allergies from colds even more complicated.

You're likely dealing with a cold if you have a sudden runny nose, cough and sore throat, followed by a general malaise. These symptoms are caused by a viral infection that others can catch and they typically

dissipate within seven to 10 days. However, if your symptoms persist or worsen beyond this timeframe, it may be worth consulting a doctor to rule out other underlying conditions.

On the other hand, if you're experiencing symptoms such as sneezing, itchy eyes, and a runny or itchy nose that comes and goes, you're more likely dealing with allergies. The [American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology](#) notes that environmental allergies can be triggered by pollen, mold, dust mites, pet dander and even certain foods.

Unlike colds, other people cannot catch allergies and symptoms can persist for weeks or even months, depending on the severity of the [allergy](#) triggers. If you suspect you may have allergies, it's best to consult an allergist for proper diagnosis and treatment.

## **Cold and allergies management and treatment**

Whether you're suffering from a cold or allergies, finding relief from your symptoms is key to feeling better. While the causes and symptoms of these two conditions may overlap, the treatments can differ.

Treatment for a cold generally involves managing the symptoms while the body fights off the virus. According to [Johns Hopkins Medicine](#), over-the-counter medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) and aspirin can help relieve pain and reduce fever. Nasal sprays and decongestants can help alleviate [nasal congestion](#) and sinus pressure, while cough syrups can help with coughing. Staying hydrated and resting while recovering from a cold is essential. Antibiotics are ineffective in treating colds as they only work against bacterial infections, not viruses.

For allergies, on the other hand, the Cleveland Clinic states the first step in treatment is to [identify and avoid the allergen triggers](#) as much as

possible. Over-the-counter antihistamines can help block the histamines released by the body during an allergic reaction. Nasal sprays and eye drops can also help alleviate symptoms. For more severe allergies, prescription medications such as corticosteroids may be necessary. Allergy shots, also known as immunotherapy, can help desensitize the body to specific allergens over time.

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