What’s the difference between a cold and the flu?

January 2, 2018 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Let’s start with the similarities. Influenza and the common cold are both caused by respiratory viruses. This means there are some similarities, such as feeling congested and having a cough. Antibiotics won’t fix either one of them since both are caused by viruses; antibiotics only treat infections caused by bacteria.

The main differences between colds and the flu are the symptoms. The flu is usually much more severe. The main symptom of a cold is usually a runny or stuffy nose. Nasal congestion may also accompany the flu, but other typical flu symptoms include fever, chills, cough, sore throat, muscle or body aches, headaches and fatigue.

The flu can cause serious problems such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations. If you think you have the flu, see your health care provider as soon as you can. A simple nasal swab test can determine if you have the flu. If the test is positive, your provider may prescribe antiviral medication to lessen the severity of flu symptoms.

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