

Is it a cold or the flu?

Fall is a good time to review the signs of and treatments for seasonal illnesses

Fall and winter mean seasonal illnesses. While coronavirus (COVID) and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) have seen spikes in recent years, the common cold and influenza (the flu) seem to be unwelcome neighbors consistently. A cold and the flu should both be taken seriously, but there are ways to tell symptoms apart and know where to go for treatment.

Brittany Anderson is an advanced practice nurse who sees seasonal illnesses regularly at OSF HealthCare OnCall Urgent Care. She reminds you that every case is different, but you should watch how your symptoms start.

"With the flu, symptoms are more abrupt. For a cold, symptoms can be gradual," Anderson says.

Cold symptoms include runny nose, sneezing, coughing and sore throat. Those are seen with the flu, too, as well as fatigue, body aches, chills and fever.

Anderson says for cold symptoms, a visit to an urgent care is a good first step. Urgent cares typically offer a rapid test to see if your illness is indeed a cold or the flu.

"Cold management is really just treating those symptoms," Anderson explains. "That can be managed with things over-the-counter [non-prescription]. Depending on the symptoms you present with, the provider can help you with which items may be more appropriate."

Medications include:

- Decongestants for your nose
- Medicine like Mucinex for coughing with mucus or phlegm (called a productive cough)
- Other cough suppressants like Delsym, Dayquil, Nyquil and Robitussin for coughing without discharge (called a dry cough)
- Tylenol and ibuprofen for aches, pain and fever

Anderson says for the flu, a provider may try some of those medications. But high-risk people (people older than 65, children younger than five, pregnant women and people with a compromised immune system) may get an antiviral treatment like Tamiflu.

Anderson says people with a cold typically recover in seven to 10 days, but it may take up to 14 days if their health was already poor. The flu may be more involved.

"Some of those high-risk individuals are a little more at-risk for severe complications like pneumonia, respiratory distress or sepsis," Anderson says.

If you have sudden symptoms like difficulty breathing, chest pain or chest tightness, skip urgent care. Call 9-1-1 and be seen at the hospital.

So what's the bottom line advice to avoid these icky illnesses this cold season?

Anderson repeats what any provider will tell you: it starts with prevention.

Eat a healthy diet, drink plenty of water and exercise. If you feel unwell, stay away from others to prevent spread. Cough and sneeze into your elbow or a tissue, not the open air. Wash your hands thoroughly and regularly. Don't put your fingers in your mouth, nose and ears. Stay current on vaccinations.

"For the most part if you're healthy, you can treat illnesses at home with over-the-counter medications," Anderson says. "If symptoms get worse, the sooner you get checked out, the better your outcome is."