



Cold or Flu: Not Always Easy to Tell



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These days, every time anyone sneezes or coughs more than twice or just wakes up feeling really punk, they immediately figure (a view that is vigorously reinforced by worried family and bystanders) that they're coming down with an H1N1 infection (actually, aside from doctors, the media and pork producers, everyone else calls it the "swine flu", but as a health professional, I stick with my colleagues).

Certainly, symptoms such as those might indicate an H1N1 infection, but they could also be early symptoms of a cold, because garden variety cold viruses are constantly circulating in the community (interestingly, seasonal flu, generally one of the "usual suspects" for upper respiratory symptoms at this time of year, is still not here much, although that will likely change as we head into winter).

So how can you distinguish between flu and a cold? It's not always easy, but here are some general guidelines.

A cold is a mild infection and nearly always starts with a "scratchy" throat that fades in a day or two to be replaced by (that bane of Translink) congestion, although in this case that means congestion of both the nasal passages and the upper respiratory tract, both of which can lead to a cough.

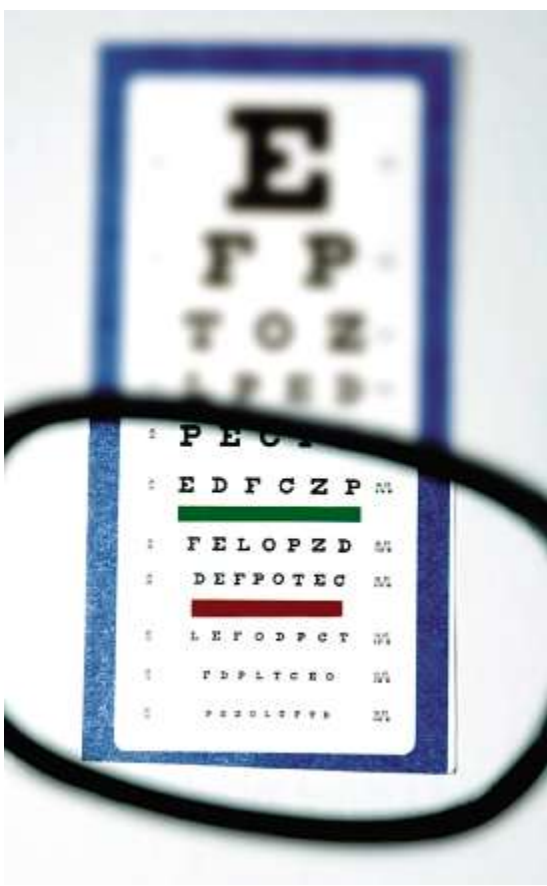
You may feel hot with a cold, but colds usually don't produce much of a temperature spike (fever is more common in kids' colds).

Those bothersome symptoms may also interfere with sleep and you may feel slightly low in energy, but overall, a cold doesn't make you "achey", and all you require is lots of chicken soup (or a culturally-equivalent potion), rest (staying home a day or two is never a bad idea to minimize the spread of your germs), decongestants if needed, fluids, and (for men) immense gobs of sympathy (you might say that's "man-datory").

Cold symptoms pass in about a week (seven days if you take Echinacea or garlic or any other homebrew that your Auntie Em swears by).

Flu is usually a significantly nastier business (although as with any infection, some people get very mild or few symptoms).

Flu can produce all the symptoms mentioned earlier, but more prominently, flu often produces fever, headache, fatigue, generalized achiness



(which can be quite severe with an H1N1 infection), and gastro-intestinal symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhea, and the flu can also last for several days longer than a cold does.

Treatment of a seasonal flu is the same as for a cold (although anti-viral medications can be useful in certain circumstances), while treatment of an H1N1 infection also includes compulsory rest at home till the symptoms ease, and early use of anti-viral drugs for high-risk people, especially pregnant women, young kids, and people with several pre-existing chronic health conditions (having asthma seems to be a particularly important risk factor).

Finally, as with any infection, if you have flu or cold symptoms and you begin to feel progressively worse or if you're simply not sure what's happening, contact a health professional - not your spouse or your aunt Em, unless either of those has a medical degree - about what to do.

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