

A Cold Versus Allergies: What's the Difference?

Many people often attribute their congestion and runny nose to a cold, but they may not realize that they actually suffer from allergies. Left untreated, allergies can cause more serious conditions like sinusitis, an inflammation of one or more of the nasal sinuses, or ear infections. Therefore, it is important to know the difference between a common cold and allergies in order to receive proper treatment for your symptoms.

Cold and allergy symptoms are usually very similar, but the main difference is the length of time that symptoms last. A cold normally disappears after a week. Allergies, on the other hand, can last for weeks or even longer. The following chart provides a few guidelines to help you differentiate between a common cold and allergies.

Allergies vs. Colds

	Allergies	Colds
Symptoms	Runny or stuffed nose, sneezing, wheezing, watery and itchy eyes.	Can include fever, body aches and pains, along with allergy symptoms.
Warning Time	Symptoms begin almost immediately after exposure to an allergen.	Symptoms usually develop within a few days.
Duration	Symptoms last as long as you are exposed to an allergen and beyond. If the allergen is present year-round, symptoms may be chronic.	Symptoms should clear up within several days to a week.

More About Allergies

Allergies are caused by exposure to airborne allergens, such as dust mites, furry pets, mold, fungi and pollen. Allergies are not contagious, but the symptoms only vary slightly from a common cold, which is contagious. Allergy symptoms include sneezing, watery eyes, coughing, itchiness in the nose and throat, post nasal drip and perhaps a dull headache. A high temperature and body aches indicate a cold, not allergies. Allergy symptoms may last longer than a week, or could even be year-round depending on exposure to the allergen. For example, allergens such as dust mites, animal dander from pets, mold or fungi may produce year-round allergy symptoms. Pollen causes symptoms of seasonal allergies in the spring and fall.

Although there is no cure for allergies, several treatment options are available, including over-the-counter and prescription medications. Immunotherapy, or allergy shots, is another alternative. However, immunotherapy is only recommended for allergic asthma, allergic rhinitis, conjunctivitis and stinging insect allergy.

To find out more about the differences between a common cold and allergies, contact an allergist/immunologist. An allergist/immunologist is the most qualified medical professional trained to manage the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of allergies and asthma.

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