

Is it a Cold, the Flu, or COVID-19?

With so many overlapping symptoms, it can be tough to tell the difference.

BY [ALICE OGLETHORPE](#) OCT 6, 2020



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It used to be that you'd start to get the sniffles or wake up with a fever and body aches and you had a pretty good idea whether it was a run-of-the-mill head cold or a knock-you-out-for-a-week case of the flu. But times are different. The COVID-19 outbreak has made it trickier to know what to ask when you call the doctor about what's ailing you.

“Three different viruses cause a cold, flu, or COVID-19, but because so many symptoms are the result of your immune system reacting to the virus (your body creates histamines, for example, which leads to congestion), they can seem

similar,” says Christienne Alexander, MD, president of the Florida Academy of Family Physicians. Dr. Alexander helped formulate this cheat sheet to the most common symptoms for each of the big three illnesses, and offered some tips on what to do if you feel under the weather.

Common Cold

Symptoms for the cold tend to come on gradually and mostly involve the head and neck, according to Dr. Alexander. Here's what to look out for:

Sneezing

Stuffy nose/runny nose

Sore throat

Productive cough (a 'wet' or chesty cough that produces mucus or phlegm)

Watery eyes

The Flu

Unlike the slow onset of a cold, flu symptoms come on suddenly. “You’ll hear someone say they got hit by a truck,” says Dr. Alexander. “It’s almost out of the blue.” She says the first two flu symptoms listed below are the ones that make you feel truly awful.

Fever/chills

Body aches/muscle pain

Fatigue

Cough

Shortness of breath

Sore throat

Stuffy nose/runny nose

Headache

COVID-19

Now comes the tricky part: All of the aforementioned flu symptoms are also associated with COVID-19. There are 11 kinds of symptoms correlated with COVID-19 (so far), but Dr. Alexander says most people who are symptomatic will have one of the first three symptoms listed. There is one major outlier that can help differentiate between COVID-19 and the flu or a cold: “The loss of taste and smell is unique to COVID-19,” Dr. Alexander confirms. Another unique characteristic of COVID-19 is that you might not have any symptoms at all. That said, here are the important ones to remember:

Fever/chills

Cough

Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

Fatigue

Body aches/muscle pain

Headaches

New loss of taste or smell

Sore throat

Congestion/runny nose

Nausea/vomiting

Diarrhea

What To Do If You're Sick

In the past, you could continue going about your daily life while waiting to see if your symptoms got worse before deciding what to do. But because COVID-19 is so contagious, that's not a great idea right now. “Make sure any time you start to experience symptoms, you stay at home until you know what's going on,” says Dr. Alexander. “Call your doctor and explain how you're feeling to determine if you need to get tested for COVID-19 or the flu.” In other words, until you know for sure

that you don't have COVID-19, keeping yourself away from others is the right thing to do.

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