

Difference Between Cold & Allergy Symptoms

Is It a Common Cold or Allergies?

You've got a runny nose, a cough, and congestion. So have you caught a cold or is it allergies? Unfortunately, it's often hard to tell—even for doctors. But here's information that may help. Read on to learn more about the causes and treatment of cold and allergy symptoms.

What Are Colds and Allergies?

Colds are caused by hundreds of different viruses. When one of these viruses gets into your body, your immune system attacks. Some of the effects of this immune response are the classic symptoms of a cold, such as congestion and coughing.

The germs that cause colds are contagious. You can pick them up when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or shakes hands with you. After a couple of weeks, at the most, your immune system fights off the virus and you stop having symptoms.

Allergies are caused by an overactive immune system. For some reason, your body mistakes harmless substances—such as mold or pollen—for germs and attacks them. Your body releases chemicals such as histamine, just as it does when fighting a cold. This can cause swelling in your nasal passages, a runny nose, coughing, and sneezing. Allergies are not contagious, although some people may inherit a tendency to develop them.

Characteristic	Cold	Allergy
Duration	Three- Fourteen Days	Days to months—as long as you are exposed to the allergen
Time of Year	Most often in the winter, but possible at any time.	Any time of the year—although the appearance of some allergens are seasonal
Onset of symptoms	Symptoms take a few days to appear after infection with the virus.	Symptoms can begin immediately after exposure to the allergen
Symptom	Cold	Allergy
Cough	Often	Sometimes
Aches	Sometimes	Never
Fatigue	Sometimes	Sometimes
Fever	Rarely	Never
Itchy, watery eyes	Rarely	Often
Sore Throat	Often	Sometimes
Runny or stuffy nose	Often; usually yellow mucus	Often; usually clear mucus