

Is it a cold or the flu? How to tell the difference



What is the common cold?

“The common cold is an upper respiratory viral infection caused by an adenovirus, rhinovirus, or coronavirus,” explains **Dr. Niket Sonpal**, a board-certified internist and gastroenterologist in New York City. “More than 100 different viruses can cause the common cold, meaning there’s a lot of variability.” Partly for this reason, there is no universal cure for a cold, nor is there a surefire way to prevent it. Luckily, however, the common cold is usually not very severe.



How might you catch it?

“These airborne viruses typically spread when someone sick sneezes or coughs,” Sonpal says. “You can also get infected if you come in contact with a surface that a sick person also contacted and then touch your nose, mouth, or eyes.”



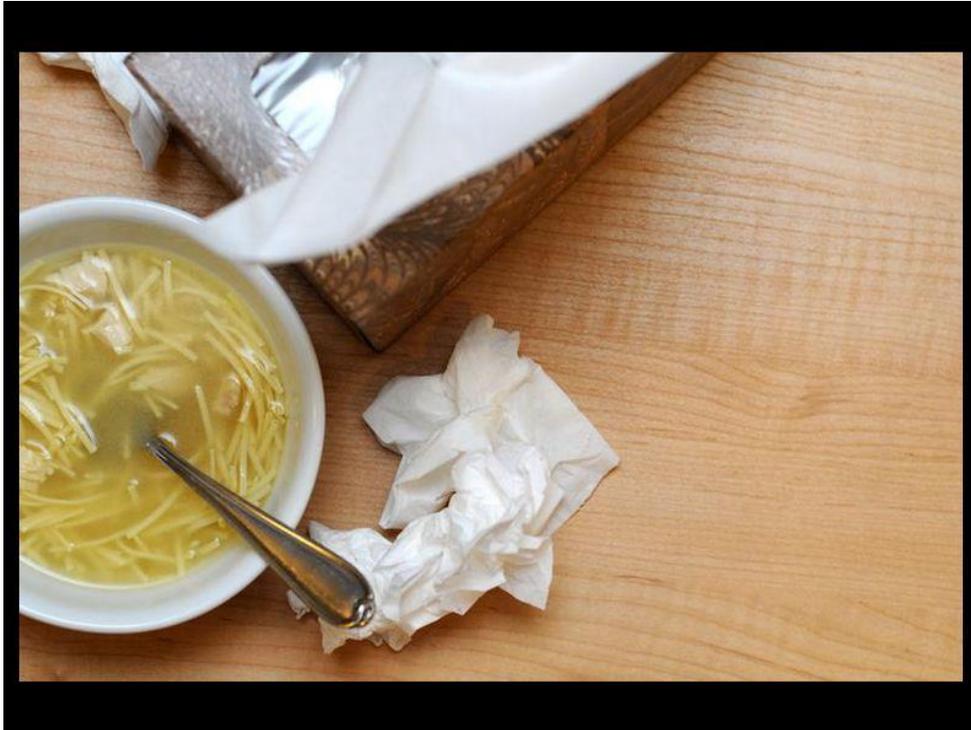
Flu season

Unlike the common cold, the flu has a season. Flu season typically runs from November through March, although Sonpal notes that you can still get it in October or as late as May. “You can catch the flu at other times of the year,” he says. “But symptoms outside of flu season are more likely to be from a cold or an allergy.” At the start of flu season, it’s recommended that you get a flu shot to protect yourself. Here are 15 things you need to know before you get yours.



How to treat a cold

The best way to treat the common cold? According to Sonpal, you should prioritize resting and taking care of yourself by drinking plenty of fluids and eating nutritious foods. (These immune-boosting foods are a good place to start.) However, Sonpal says, “You can treat the symptoms of a cold to help you feel better, but this will not make you recover sooner.” There is no cure for the common cold. Other helpful tips could be to take over-the-counter cold medicine or cough drops to treat symptoms (but don’t overdo it on the cough drops). You could also gargle salt water, which may help ease a sore throat and nasal congestion. Avoid these foods when you have a runny nose, though – they could make it worse.



How to treat the flu

You can't cure the flu – you just have to wait it out. But the best way to take care of yourself when you're down with the flu is to rest at home, get plenty of fluids, and monitor your symptoms closely. If your fever or symptoms get more severe or you are 65 years or older, pregnant, or have a long-term medical condition, you should see a doctor. Sonpal says that an unusually severe headache is also a sign you should seek medical attention. Sipping on soothing beverages can help mitigate your flu symptoms, as well. [These beverages are your best choices to drink when you're sick.](#)