

# IS IT THE FLU OR A COMMON COLD?

More than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu-related complications each year<sup>[1]</sup>. In addition to getting an annual flu shot, it is important to learn the differences between the flu and a common cold. **Dr. Puneet Chopra**, chair and medical director of Observation and Emergency Services at Doctors Community Hospital, educates people about these two health conditions.

## Q: What are the differences between the flu and a cold?

Usually, people start experiencing flu symptoms very suddenly, but cold symptoms usually emerge more gradually. The biggest sign of flu is a high fever—between 100°F and 102°F—accompanied by body aches, exhaustion and sometimes a cough. People who have colds often experience sneezing, and a stuffy or runny nose. The below side-by-side chart compares these two illnesses.

| SYMPTOMS              | COLD               | FLU                                    |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--|
| Fever                 | • Uncommon         | • High between 100-102°F               |
| Headaches             | • Uncommon         | • Prominent                            |
| General body aches    | • Mild             | • Common and can be severe             |
| Fatigue or exhaustion | • Very mild        | • Prominent and can last days to weeks |
| Stuffy or runny nose  | • Common           | • Sometimes                            |
| Sneezing              | • Common           | • Sometimes                            |
| Sore throat           | • Common           | • Sometimes                            |
| Cough                 | • Mild to moderate | • Common and can become severe         |

<sup>[1]</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/disease.htm>, 11/3/14

### Q: Who is most at risk for getting the flu?

Anyone can catch the flu. However, people may be at a higher risk of developing related complications (e.g. dehydration, bacterial pneumonia, sinus infections, ear infections, etc.) because of their immune systems. These people include seniors, children, infants and pregnant women. In fact, ninety percent of flu-related deaths and more than half of flu-related hospitalizations occur in people ages 65 and older.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Q: What can people do to treat their colds or flu?

There are no cures for colds or the flu. However, over-the-counter cold medicines and cough suppressants can offer temporary symptom relief. Gargling with warm salt water can help ease discomfort from a sore throat. Also, people should get plenty of rest and stay well hydrated.

### Q: When should people visit their doctors?

Flu symptoms usually subside within a week or two on their own, but sometimes medical treatment may be necessary. For example, congestion can lead to ear or sinus infections that may require antibiotics. Flu-related coughs can worsen and lead to serious conditions such as pneumonia. People should visit their primary care doctors or an emergency department if:

- Their fevers do not subside within a few days or worsens
- They can't keep down food or beverages for longer than 48 hours
- Their coughs worsen or lasts longer than two or three weeks
- Their congestion or headaches worsens and doesn't respond to cold medicine

If at any time people have difficulty breathing or experience chest pain, they should call 911 immediately to receive emergency care.

### Q: What can people do to avoid getting sick?

Healthy lifestyles—exercising, eating a balanced diet, not smoking, etc. — contribute to overall wellbeing. Also, people should wash their hands and surfaces (e.g. kitchen counters, stair railings, etc.) regularly where cold and flu germs are likely to be present. When people are sick, they should stay at home to prevent infecting others.

Also, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone ages six months and older receive an annual flu vaccination with rare exceptions.<sup>[3]</sup> *Remember, this vaccination does not cause the flu.*

### Doctors Community Hospital's Emergency Department

Our board-certified emergency medical specialists are available 24/7 to treat people who experience severe cold and flu symptoms. With access to a diagnostic laboratory and technology, people can count on the Emergency Department at Doctors Community Hospital to receive comprehensive and high-quality care conveniently available in their neighborhood.

<sup>[2]</sup> Flu.gov, <http://www.flu.gov/at-risk/seniors/index.html>, 09/21/2015

<sup>[3]</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/consumer/vaccinations.htm>, 11/3/14



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