Patients may find it difficult to distinguish between a cold and the flu, and pharmacists can help them determine if self-treatment is appropriate.

Having a cold or the flu is a familiar event for many of us. A cold usually comes on slowly, starting with a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, and a sore throat. The flu often comes on quickly with extreme tiredness, fever, body aches, and a cough. Both usually last for one to two weeks. The symptoms are similar and difficult to tell apart. The flu is typically worse than a cold and more likely to cause complications that require prescription medications or hospitalization.

How Do I Know If It’s a Cold or the Flu?

The flu and the common cold are respiratory illnesses caused by different viruses. There are hundreds of cold viruses that can cause a cold any time of year. There are fewer flu viruses. The main two types are influenza A and B.

Although the flu is most common during flu season, which lasts from October to mid-May, it can happen any time of year. Unfortunately, the flu and a cold cannot be reliably told apart by either the symptoms or the time of year.

When Should I See a Doctor?

Complications of the flu and a cold include strep throat, pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus infections, and ear infections. Signs of these complications include a persistent fever (greater than 101 degrees Fahrenheit for more than three or four days in adults), painful swallowing, persistent coughing (lasting longer than three weeks), persistent congestion, and headaches (lasting longer than one week). People with chronic health problems, such as obesity, asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, can have additional complications.

People with a high risk of developing complications should see their doctor if they have flu-like symptoms. Although there is no cure for the flu, a doctor can prescribe oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza). These antiviral drugs can lessen the severity and shorten the duration of the flu, thus reducing the likelihood of complications. These drugs are most effective if taken within 48 hours of the start of flu symptoms.

If complications are already present, the doctor can prescribe additional medications, such as antibiotics, or recommend hospitalization. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists the following groups as at high risk for developing complications:

- Children younger than 5 years, but especially children younger than 2 years
- Adults 65 years and older
- Pregnant women
- American Indians and Alaskan natives
- People who have chronic medical conditions

If your doctor prescribes medications to treat the flu, it is important to take the medicine promptly and properly. Take time to talk to your pharmacist about how to take the medications and what to expect. When treating the flu, either after seeing a doctor or on your own, the symptoms should begin to clear up within one week. If they do not, contact your doctor.

The CDC lists emergency warning signs to watch for that require immediate medical attention, especially for those in the high-risk groups.
Emergency Warning Signs

In Children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that they do not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In addition to the signs above, get medical help right away for an infant who has any of these signs:

- Unable to eat
- Trouble breathing
- No tears when crying
- Significantly fewer wet diapers than normal
- Younger than 2 months with fever of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or higher
- 3 to 6 months old with fever of 103 degrees Fahrenheit or higher
- Older than 6 months with fever of 104 degrees Fahrenheit or higher

In Adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough

When Should I Treat My Illness at Home?

If you’re not in one of the high-risk groups for complications, you don’t have any of the emergency warning signs, you’re well enough to take care of your basic needs, and your symptoms are mild, you’re most likely able to treat your flu or cold at home. If you’re not sure, talk to your pharmacist or doctor.

Self-Care for Cold and Flu

Getting plenty of rest and fluids is the first thing you can do to speed your recovery. It's best to avoid caffeinated beverages and alcohol, and instead focus on water, juice, and soup. Stay in bed, keep contact with household members to a minimum, and don't go out in public unless absolutely necessary. Caregivers should likewise keep contact to a minimum and wash hands often with soap and water.

Remember that during the first three days that you have cold symptoms, you're contagious. With the flu, you're contagious one day before symptoms develop and up to five to seven days after becoming sick. Stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone, except to get medical care.

Most symptoms can be treated with over-the-counter medications if they're getting in the way of sleep. Again, take time to talk to your pharmacist about how to take the medications, read the package directions each time, and use only the supplied measuring device. Children younger than 6 years should take cough or cold medications only under the direction of a doctor. Children under the age of 19 should never take aspirin.

How Can I Avoid Getting The Flu or a Cold?

Good personal hygiene is important for preventing illness. Touching your face, mouth, nose, or eyes after contact with the virus provides an easy way in. Coughing and sneezing sends the virus into the air.
Using tissues, covering your mouth with the crook of your elbow, or even using a mask can reduce the spread of the virus. Getting vaccinated for the flu is one of the best ways to protect yourself and your community against the virus.

**Who Should Get a Flu Shot?**

Unless you are allergic to chicken eggs or had an allergic reaction to a flu shot in the past, everyone older than 6 months should be vaccinated.